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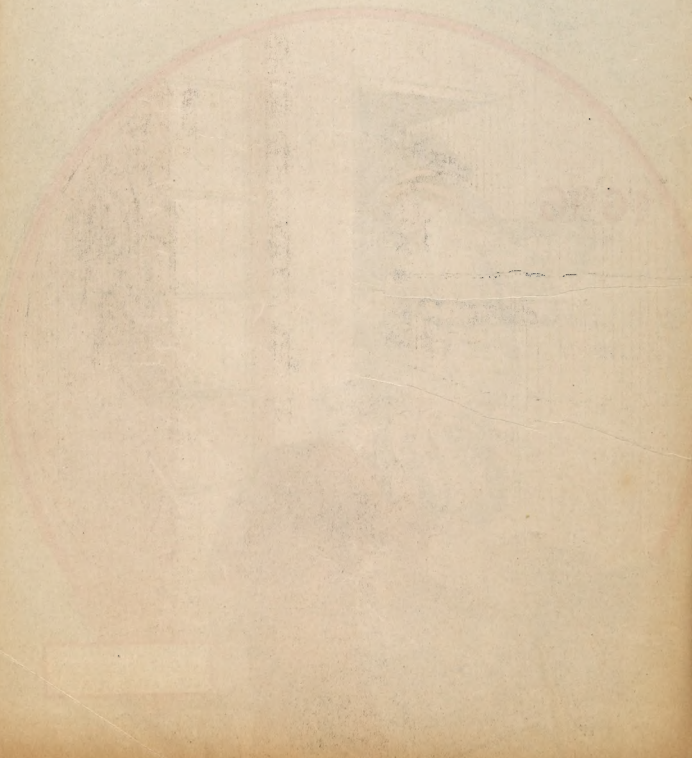
NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.

DR. QUARTZ, THE SECOND



NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

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DOCTOR QUARTZ, THE SECOND;*

Or, Nick Carter and the Freight-car Mystery.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

JEREMY STONE'S GREAT CASE.

Nick Carter swung from the forward platform of the smoking car to the floor of the station, purposely dropping his gripsack in a clumsy fashion and stumbling forward so that he nearly sprawled his length upon the planks as he did so.

"Gosh all hemlock!" he exclaimed, with the unmistakable twang of a Yankee farmer, as he picked himself up and recovered possession of his lost property, "wouldn't Mirandy give me the merry ha! ha! ha! ef she saw me do that aire! Geewhilikens! Jerusha! Gosh!"

The people around him were laughing good-naturedly at his discomfiture, and, perceiving the fact, he wheeled in his tracks and addressed the man who happened to be nearest to him.

"Say, mister, maybe you think you could do it better; hey? I cal'late that I kin drive a yoke of oxen ez well ez the next feller, an' thet I kin pick up more pertaties in an hour than any man in Wyndham Caounty, back in the State of Vermont, but I'll be eternally consarned ef I kin git onto the curves of thet aire train of cars, an' I've been on the confounded thing fur nigh onto a hull week, too. When I go back, I'm goin' to walk. Say!"

"Well, sir?" inquired the man he had addressed, laughing in spite of himself.

"Don't 'sir' me, if you please. I'm jest plain Joshua Juniper, I am. Josh, I'm mostly called back East. But, say!"

"Well?"

"This here town is Kansas City, ain't it?"

"Certainly."

"Well, where's the city? I don't see nothin' but a lot of railroad tracks, a muddy river, and a high bluff. Ain't there any city around here?"

"Yes; right over the top of that bluff. You take the car——"

"No, I don't. Not on yewer life, young man. I've taken all the cars I'm a-goin' tew; and all the cars have taken me that's a-goin' tew. Walkin' is good enough for me. Do I go over that aire hill?"

"Yes; straight over the top of it."

"Gosh! Say; ain't there a path, 'r something to foller?"

"There's the street where the cars go. You'll find it rather steep walking."

"Steep! Say, did you ever climb the Glebe, 'r old Cobble, 'r Markham, 'r any of them little hills of ourn back in Vermont? No? Well, the fellers what aire raised among them aire hills wouldn't call this bluff of yours anything at all; they'd jest kick it out of the way, they would. Say!"

"Well?"

"Yew don't happen tew know a feller what runs a dime museum here, dew yew?"

"Yes, I do."

"Shaw! Yew don't say so! Now I wonder ef yew happen tew know Jeremy Stone; hey?"

The man started visibly, peered closely into Nick Carter's imperturbable face, and replied:

"Yes; I do know such a man."

"Git out Do yew, now? Yew don't say so? Gosh! Say!"

"Well?"

"Yew couldn't tell me where I could find him, could yew?"

"You are talking to him now," replied the man coolly.

"Geewhilikens!" exclaimed Nick, in well-simulated surprise. "Ef that don't beat all! Say!"

*Reprinte by Request.

"Well?"

"I've got a letter in my pocket fur him."

"Then you had better give it to me, for I am Jeremy Stone," replied the stranger.

"Yep," continued Nick, as if he had not heard the last remark, "I've got a friend back East who told me that Jeremy Stone wanted a new freak, and he reckoned that I was about the biggest freak he knowed, so he gave me a letter of introduction."

"Very well; let me see it."

"He said mebby you'd be a-standin' on the platform at the station a-waitin' fur me, and I jest sized yew up fur Jeremy when I spied yew."

"Where is the letter?"

"Right here;" and Nick produced a much-crumpled envelope from his pocket and gave it into the hands of his companion. "Mebby you'd better walk over to that winder while yew read it," he added. "I see a lot of rubbernecks around here—more'n we've got back East, a darned sight, too!"

Several spectators who had drawn near to them in curiosity, stepped back hastily at this remark, and Nick looked around at them and smiled while Jeremy Stone followed his suggestion and crossed the platform to a window, where he opened the letter.

What he saw when he did so was a letter which he had written himself; one that he had written and sent to Nick Carter, in New York, a week before. It was as follows:

"My Dear Mr. Carter: I am still in the museum business, as you will see by the heading, although I have transferred my establishment from San Francisco to Kansas City. We have never happened to meet since the famous Doctor Quartz case, several years ago, and you will remember that it was I who started you on that case by calling you West to investigate the great piano-box mystery.

"Well, I've got something on hand now which is fully as mysterious as that was, and if I didn't know that Doctor Quartz was dead, I should say that he or his ghost had had a hand in this affair.

"If you are not too busy, and have a mind to take a run out here to investigate the affair, I'll pay all expenses and make it worth your while besides, whether you take up the case or not; and if you do take the case —well, you know me!

"Wire me if you decide to come, and I'll meet you at the station."

The letter was signed with his own name—Jeremy Stone—and it was, in fact, the identical letter he had sent to the great detective.

Then, like a flash, it came over him that the green countryman, who pretended to have come from Vermont, was none other than Nick Carter himself; so he folded the letter, placed it in his pocket, and returned to the spot where the detective was awaiting him, and where there had now collected quite a crowd of rubbernecks, as Nick had called them.

"All right, Mr. Juniper," he said. "If you won't ride in a car, I don't suppose you have any objections to taking a carriage, have you?"

"Anything from a hayrack to a side-bar buggy will suit me tew death, Mister Stone," replied Nick.

"This way, then; and Jeremy Stone led the way through the station.

The two were presently seated inside a closed hack, and being driven rapidly toward the city.

"You fooled me all right, Nick, that time," said Stone.

"Did I? Well, I did it only on general principles. You know you said nothing of what the case was, and I thought it would be just as well to come here without announcing to the world who I am. Where are we going now?"

"I thought I'd take you to the Coates House."

"Nonsense! You don't live there, do you?"

"No. I keep bachelor's quarters on Oak Street."

"Well, let's go there. It is quiet, isn't it?"

"It is quiet enough."

"Then that is the place for us."

When at last they were seated in Mr. Stone's apartments, and Nick had restored his appearance to his natural self, they seated themselves facing each other across a table which was between the windows.

"Now," said Nick, "what is it? You see I took you at your word, and came at once."

"Yes, and I am very glad of it."

"The fact is," said Nick reminiscently, "I never got quite so much experience out of any case in my life, as I did out of the Doctor Quartz business, and I figured that you would not send for me, and write such a letter as you did, unless you were reasonably certain that it was important."

"Certainly not."

"Besides, I happen to have a little spare time on my hands just now; that is, I wanted to have, I wanted to get away from New York for a while. They seem to think there that I am a steam engine, and that all that's necessary is to shovel in more coal to keep me going night and day. To tell you the truth, it seems good to get away for a while."

"I should think it might."

"What is this case of yours, Stone?"

"It's a dandy, I think. You remember that it was a piano box before; well, it is a whole freight car this time."

"Yes; I remember. That other time, you bought a piano box at auction, when the express company sold its unclaimed goods; and you expected to get a fine upright piano, but, instead, you found an empty box, upholstered in approved style, with an inner lining of lead to give it weight, and we discovered together that a man and woman had traveled inside that thing all the way from New York to the Pacific coast."

"And that the man, who proved to be Doctor Quartz, had murdered the woman who was his companion."

"Exactly."

"Well, if this case doesn't beat that one, I'm a Dutchman, that's all!"

"How does it beat it?"

"In every way. You never saw such a complete thing in all your life. It is practically the same scheme over again, only with improvements. Unless I am greatly mistaken, a second Doctor Quartz has appeared on the scene, and this one can give the other cards and spades, and beat him at that."

"Then he's a smart one, and no mistake."

"Wait. You shall see and hear for yourself. I'll tell you all I can about it; after that I'll take you to the spot and give you a chance to see for yourself. If you

don't say it is the most interesting puzzle that has come under your observation for many a day, I'll eat my hat, that's all."

CHAPTER II.

THE FREIGHT-CAR MYSTERY.

"This is my story," said Stone, lighting a cigar and leaning comfortably back in his chair: "The morning of the day I wrote you that letter, I went down to the freight yards to look for a consignment I was expecting. It was about nine o'clock in the morning when I got there, and I very soon learned that the freight I was expecting had not arrived. The superintendent, or foreman—whatever you are pleased to call him—of the freight yard is an old acquaintance of mine, and as I was coming away I stopped to talk with him. I gave him a cigar, and we sat down on a truck and began to talk.

"While we were talking, I noticed a freight car on one of the sidings. The car appeared to be almost new, and for some reason which I cannot explain, the mere outside of it seemed to fascinate me. Presently I called Durland's attention to it.

"'What is in that car?' I asked him.

"'I'm blowed if I know!' he replied. 'I wish I did.'

"'Why?' I asked.

"'Well, for one thing, the car is in the way,' he said. 'I've had it buckled around from one place to another until I'm tired of it; but now I've got it where it don't give me much trouble. It ought to be claimed, but nobody seems anxious about what's inside it.'

"'What's the story concerning it?' I asked him then. And this is what he told me:

"It seems that the car had already been in the yard more than three weeks, so it is about four weeks now since it arrived. It is billed to Z. T. Rauk, Esquire, and it is marked, as is also the bill of lading which accompanies it: 'To be held in the yards until called for by the owner.'"

"Humph!" exclaimed Nick.

"Just what I said," went on Stone. "Now, I find that it is not an unusual thing for cars to be marked in that way, provided that there are three rules governing such cases complied with."

"What are the rules?"

"First, there is an affidavit accompanying the bill of lading which states that the car contains nothing perishable, combustible, or explosive, and a lot more things of the same kind. Second, five dollars a day must be said to the company for every day over a week which the car remains uncalled for at its place of destination, and an amount of money sufficient to cover a detention of thirty-one days must be deposited with the company; at the end of that time the company is privileged to open the car, remove the contents to the freight house, where they may be sold at public auction; or the contents of the car may be sold, unseen, to the highest bidder. Third, there must be room in the freight yard at the point of destination for the storage of the car for the original thirty-one days. See?"

"Yes; I understand."

"Well, this car does not bear the mark of any railroad, as its proprietor. There is nothing on it to show who owns it."

"Where is it billed from?"

"Philadelphia."

"What railroad forwarded it?"

"The P. & R."

"And are you sure that it is not one of their cars?"

"It isn't anybody's car. It was billed as a P. & R. car; but there isn't a thing on it to show that it belongs to that company, and investigation has showed that the P. & R. does not own a car which bears the number which is painted on this one."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I wrote two letters, one to a car-service company, asking about this car by its number, and the other to the P. & R. Company, asking the same question. Neither of them ever heard of it."

"But——"

"Don't you see, Mr. Carter, that the car must have been rung in on them in some way? It was billed in a hurry. The agent was led to suppose that he was billing one of the company's own cars, and that in some way the man who shipped the car fooled him."

"Well, you are building up quite a romance, at least."

"Oh, that isn't all! Wait."

"Go ahead."

"The bill of lading goes to show that the contents of the car consists of household goods, general merchandise, et cetera, and that all the regulations governing such shipments were complied with."

"Well, what then? The thirty-one days aren't up."

"The thirty-one days will expire the day after to-morrow, if I figure correctly."

"In that case, in all probability, Mr. Z. T. Rauk will call for his car about that time."

"I don't think he will. That is just the point.'

"Why not?"

"Just take that piece of paper on the table and write down the name of Z. T. Rauk."

"Well, I have done it. What now?"

"Spell the entire name out, backward."

"K-u-a-r-t-z," read Nick, aloud; then he raised his head quickly.

"All you've got to do is to substitute a Q for the K," said Stone.

"I see," said Nick. "You have managed to make Quartz out of the name."

"That is what I have; yes, sir."

"K-u-a-r-t-z spells Quartz all right, doesn't it?"

"It doesn't spell anything else."

"But all your bread will be dough if Mr. Rauk should happen to appear to-morrow or next day, and claim his car."

"He hasn't appeared yet—and I don't think he will."

"Is that all you know about the car, Stone?"

"Practically all; but I expect to find a greater mystery inside it than we found in the piano box."

"If this Mr. Rauk does not appear, the company will open the car the day after to-morrow, according to what you have said."

"The company doesn't have to do it. It only claims that it may do it, if it happens to want the car, or the room it occupies."

"Well?"

"In this case, they do not want the car, for the reason that the car does not belong to them, and it has not been claimed, and they do not need the room it occupies."

"Then they will merely open the car and sell the contents; eh?"

"You will remember that I told you they can do that,

or they can sell the contents of the car, 'unsight and unseen,' as we used to say when we were boys."

"But who is likely to buy a pig in a poke in that way?"

"I am. I promise to buy the pig and the poke, too."

"How do you mean?"

"In plain English, I mean that I have offered the company already a large sum for the entire layout, provided it is not claimed."

"You mean that you have offered to buy the car as well as the contents?"

"Precisely."

"But, my dear Stone, how can they give you a title to something which does not belong to them?"

"I have agreed to give them a bond, relieving them of all reliability on that score; that is, if anybody claims the car and proves ownership, to deliver it uninjured, to the owners, and to pay all damages which may be incurred by my possession in the meanwhile. In a word, the company is quite willing to accept my terms, provided the car is not claimed in the specified time. The company is not interested in the contents of the car, for it has been paid in advance, all that is coming to it. The only liability they are likely to be called upon to settle is for the car itself, and if I insure them again loss in that way, and at the same time put a profit in their hands, it is infinitely better for them than it would be to keep an unclaimed car littering up their yards for nobody knows how long; wouldn't it?"

"Sure."

"I made a clean hundred thousand dollars out of that piano-box affair, and I can afford to lose ten thousand on this one. If, on the other hand, it pans out as I think it will, I will clean up another hundred thousand—or more; see?"

"I see; yes."

"I'm a speculator. I'm in the dime-museum business. I make my money by taking risks. I make it just as a farmer makes his by planting corn. If he has a good crop, he wins; if he has a bad season, he loses. I plant my money just as he plants his corn. That is the whole thing in a nutshell."

"Then you have completed your arrangements, and if the car is not claimed, it becomes your property?"

"It does, unless somebody bids over me."

"Oh, I see. They have to make a public auction of it, anyhow, eh?"

"Certainly. When the sale is announced, as it will be, at ten o'clock in the morning after the day after tomorrow, my bid will be announced. If there is somebody there who wants the car worse than I do, he'll bid over me—if he can. If not, I take the goods; see?"

"And they already have your offer, eh?"

"Yes; and the bond is already made out and signed, sealed, and all that; also, they already have a certified check for the amount which they will return if there is no sale."

"Suppose the owner should appear at the last moment?"

"Why, then he can take his car, when he establishes ownership. I will be out nothing, save what I pay you. But he won't appear, mind that. You'll find a mystery inside that car, as sure as shooting. That's what I brought you here for. That is why I want you to open that car yourself. It's my scheme of advertising, and it is a good one. And now, all you have got to do till Thursday morning is to amuse yourself. Thursday morning, as soon after ten o'clock as it can be done, you and I will enter that car."

"Done!" said Nick.

CHAPTER III.

A WOMAN IN A VEIL.

The detective had forwarded what baggage he thought he would need, by express, and as soon as his interview with Jeremy Stone was ended, he went to the office and claimed it.

Next he sought a quiet boarding place where he had stopped before when in Kansas City, and which afforded special facilities for his work, and, having established himself there, he arrayed himself in overalls and jumper, cap and boots, and sought the freight yards described by Mr. Stone.

He had no difficulty in finding Bill Durland, the foreman of the freight yards, to whom he at once applied for a job.

"Nothin' doin'," replied Durland, to his request. "Got more men than I want now. Maybe after next week I might put you on as an extra."

"All right," said Nick. "I'll look around about that time. Say; this is a comfortable yard to work in, ain't it, boss?"

"Bet your life it is! I keep it so, too."

"That's right. Hello! What kind of a car is that one there?"

"What one?" asked Durland, without looking up.

"That one;" and Nick pointed toward the very car which he knew, by its appearance, should be the one which Stone had described to him.

"Oh," said Durland, raising his eyes, and grinning. "That is an orphan."

"Orphan?" asked Nick inquiringly.

"Yep! Ain't got any father 'r mother, as far I know. Nobody claims it; nobody seems to want it, unless it is Jeremy Stone, and what in blazes he's going to do with it is more than I can guess."

"Who's he?" asked Nick.

"Runs a dime museum."

"Oh," said Nick. "Say, that's a funny car, ain't it?"

"It ain't any funnier than the others, as I can see," replied Durland.

"It ain't got any railroad's name on it, has it?"

"Didn't I say it was an orphan?"

"I thought you was joking."

"Well, I wasn't. It came here from Philadelphia. The bill says it is filled with household goods. It's going to be sold Thursday morning. Maybe you'd like to buy it."

"Maybe I would. Say!"

"What?"

"Can I take a look at it?"

"Sure. Who's holding you?"

Nick leaped down from the freight-house platform and crossed the tracks to the car.

Outwardly it was an ordinary freight car in everything save that it had a decided appearance of newness, and that it bore no painted display of ownership.

It had been painted a dirty red, and it required only a slight study on the part of the detective for him to determine that dirt had purposely been mixed with the paint before it was spread on the car.

But even this had failed to produce the desired result

when one viewed the car from a reasonable distance. True, a chance observer, who saw it among a train of others, would not have devoted a second glance to it, because, from a little distance, it had the same appearance.

Nick began at one end of the car and walked entirely around it, and he could not, in such a rapid and careless examination, see wherein it was different from thousands of others he had seen, save for that one thing, its newness.

The bumpers at the ends were similar; the doors at the sides were alike, and he noticed also that they were carefully sealed; the ironwork was the same; the couplings were the same, and of the latest-approved pattern.

It was an up-to-date car in every respect, and from the outside there was certainly nothing mysterious about it.

The detective read the tag that was tacked against the doors, and smiled at the name, for now, since all that Stone had said about it, he could see nothing save that suggestive word, "Quartz."

Z. T. Rauk stared at him from the paper tacked upon the door, and yet, try as he would, it read Quartz to him from every direction.

"What nonsense!" he muttered to himself. "Quartz is dead. I happen to know that; and he could not very well come to life again, that's sure. This is a mere coincidence, out of which Stone has built up another alarming case. Oh, well, I haven't long to wait now till the car will be opened, anyhow."

He was turning away when he discovered that Durland was standing close to him, observing him, and with a smile on his shrewd, good-natured face.

"Well," he said, "what do you think of it?"

"I don't think," said Nick.

"Want to buy it?"

"Guess not, old man. Ain't exactly in my line."

"More in Jeremy Stone's, eh?"

"Who is Jeremy Stone?"

"I told you that once. He runs a museum."

"Oh! What's he going to do with it?"

"Stuff it, I reckon, 'r set it to music, 'r teach it to jump a rope, 'r do an act on a loop the loop. You can search me."

"Ain't nobody claimed it, eh?"

"Nit! Not a soul."

"Anybody been here to look at it?"

"Oh, two 'r three, I reckon. There was a woman down here yesterday afternoon who pretended she was looking for some freight that hadn't come yet, but she didn't fool me. She came here to take a look at that car, as sure as you're born."

"What do you suppose she wanted to see it for?" asked Nick, interested at once.

"You can search me. I made up my mind that Jeremy sent her."

"Oh, Stone! What kind of a looking woman was she?"

"Guess again, partner. I couldn't tell whether she was black or white, only that she had the sweetest, purtiest voice you ever heard."

"All covered with a veil, eh?"

"Yep. Veil and black gloves that went 'way up her sleeves to her shoulders, for all I can tell; and a figger like a—a——"

"Sylph?" suggested Nick, laughing.

"Well, I suppose so. I don't just know much about sylphs, but that would about hit her case, I reckon."

"What made you think she came here to look at the car?"

"Why, because she did look at it. She asked me a lot of questions about her supposed consignment of freight, and then she spied the car. The next thing she did was to start across the tracks and study the thing, and I sat over there in the doorway watching her, and grinning, for I saw through it all in a minute. When she came back, I said: 'Purty car, that, madam?'

"She looked at me a minute, and then she said: 'Freight cars are so interesting.'

"'Sure thing,' says I. 'What's inside that one?' said she; and I told her she could search me, without finding an answer. 'Nobody seems to know what's in it, or who it belongs to,' I said. 'It's going to be sold at auction, Thursday, at ten o'clock in the morning. Maybe you'd like to buy it,' says I.

"'Thank you,' says she; and then off she goes without another word."

"And have others been here to see it, too?"

"Oh, yes. There was a man—two men, in fact. They came together about a week ago, but I can't swear that they came to see that car."

"You only think so, eh?"

"Well, it looked like it. They came here together, about five o'clock in the afternoon, pretendin' they was looking for a car, and I, thinking maybe they was the ones who owned this one, took 'em straight to it. The big one of the two merely shrugged his shoulders, and said that wasn't the one, and turned away; but the other fellow—the little one, only he wasn't so little, after all, save by comparison with the other—he sort of hunched around a little closer to the car, and he rubbered there for ten minutes or more before he seemed to be satisfied."

"What did he say or do then?"

"Nothing, only lighted a cigar, and said he guessed their car wasn't there. They went out after that, without taking any trouble to search further, which is what made me think they came here to see that car, for there are two dozen here, or more, which they didn't take the trouble to inspect."

"You didn't know who they were, eh?"

"Narry; and I know most every business man in Kansas City by sight, too."

"You know a lot of people, don't you?"

"Reckon I do, partner. For instance, I'll know you the next time you show up here, and I will know after you have gone that you came here to see that car, too."

Nick laughed aloud.

"You're all right, Durland," he said. "Maybe I did. I was just thinking that maybe I'd buy the car."

"Then you'll have to bid high, I can tell you that."

"Why?"

"Well, I hear that Jeremy Stone has put in a bid that would make your hair curl; and if I am any judge of human nature, there will be somebody at the sale to put in a bid or two for that woman with the sweet voice."

"You think so?"

"I'd bet my life on it."

"Why?"

"Well, I ain't got any good reason, only that I think so; and if I am right, there'll be another bidder as well."

"You don't say so. Who?"

"One of them men. You see, I expect to see some fun out of that car before I'm through with it. And, say, to tell you the truth, I'm beginning to get spooky about it, too. I only hope they won't find that it's filled with corpses."

CHAPTER IV.

JEREMY STONE'S SPECULATION.

Nick Carter decided that he would not appear at the sale of the car.

Of course he intended to be there, and was there, but it was in the character of a spectator, and in a disguise which even the announced shrewdness of Foreman Bill Durland failed to penetrate.

The detective was somewhat surprised by the notoriety of the car in question.

He had not supposed that its presence was known, save to a very few among whom Jeremy Stone was the leading spirit; but such news as that concerning the car travels apace, and as the hour of ten approached on that Thursday morning, a crowd began to collect, until finally, when the sale was announced, there were upward of a hundred persons present to see and hear all that should take place.

The auctioneer began by detailing the history of the car so far as it was known.

"Briefly," he announced, "the car was shipped here under a regulation between the railroads"—and he proceeded to describe what Jeremy Stone had already outlined to the detective. Then he continued:

"The car came from Philadelphia. An owner of the car cannot be found. The railroad which forwarded it here repudiates it. Nobody has claimed it; and there it is.

"I wish also to tell you that, although the bill of lading recites that it contains household goods and merchandise, the car is very light. It weighs, in fact, only a few thousand pounds more than the bare car should weigh.

"The company has no established right to dispose of the car itself; merely the contents. But the company has decided to dispose of the whole thing to any person who will give back a bond indemnifying it from loss by the transaction.

"Mr. Jeremy Stone, of this city, has offered such a bid, supported by such a bond, and has made a cash deposit to substantiate it.

"I will announce his bid, and if any person here is disposed to exceed it, and to support his offer as substantially as Mr. Stone has done, such an offer may be made within the next five minutes. If, at the end of that time, the bid has not been increased the car and contents will be knocked down to Mr. Stone. His bid is ten thousand dollars."

Nick Carter was seated on a dry-goods box within earshot of the auctioneer, and in such a position that he could see the faces of the crowd which had gathered to witness the sale. That is, he was partly back of the auctioneer so that he faced the crowd.

He had watched narrowly every face which suggested interest to him, and he had no difficulty in picking out among them the two men to whom Durland had referred—the big man and the little man.

But it was not until the auctioneer had mounted his box and began to talk, that he saw a woman there at all.

Just at that moment, however, a carriage drew up at the platform of the freight house, and a middle-aged, angular, sour-visaged woman got out and took a position where she could see and hear.

The curtains of the carriage were drawn so that Nick could not view the interior, but he had not a doubt that it contained another occupant, and that the other was the lady with the sweet voice, to whom the freight-house foreman had referred.

He was positive that the angular woman who had left the carriage was not the one.

However, not a person in that throng raised a voice to increase the offer already made in writing by Jeremy Stone.

Minute after minute went by until the allotted five had elapsed, and there was no interruption.

Neither the angular woman nor either of the two men seemed to take any interest in the matter other than to watch the proceedings as the others who were gathered there did.

Then the auctioneer closed his watch with a snap, and mounted his box a second time.

"Time is up," he announced. "Do I hear any bid in excess of Mr. Stone's? No? Once! Twice! Three times! No bid? Sold to Mr. Stone under the stipulations agreed upon."

He descended from the box and disappeared in the direction of his offices.

Jeremy Stone, on the outskirts of the crowd, smiled and rubbed his hands together.

Then he raised himself and looked long and searchingly around the place, searching each face for Nick Carter; but the detective had taken care to arrange his disguise so that even his employer would not recognize him, and he remained placidly seated where he was, in the meanwhile keeping his eyes and his ears open for news.

There are always boys who frequent crowds of the sort that was gathered there, and this occasion was not an exception.

Two boys were seated on a plank immediately in front of the detective, and if Jeremy Stone had not been so occupied at the time of Nick Carter's arrival at the Union Station, he could have noticed that both of them had left the same passenger coach from which Nick Carter had alighted, only that they left it by the other door, and instantly disappeared in the crowd at the station.

Now, as Nick Carter saw that a number of people were collecting about Stone, where he remained, rubbing his hands, he left his perch upon the box and approached him, managing, as he did so, to pass quite close to the two lads already described.

"Patsy," he said, "you are to follow the two men with the silk hats. Report at my rooms as soon as you know anything."

"Correct, sir," replied Patsy, without moving or turning his head.

"And Ten-Ichi," added Nick, "your game is the woman and the hack. I suspect the one I care most about is inside the carriage, out of sight."

Then he continued on his way toward Jeremy Stone.

The crowd was already clamoring to know when he intended to open the car, but Jeremy still smiled and still rubbed his hands together.

At last he announced:

"Gentlemen, you know I have bought this thing on

a speculation. I have already secured a permit from the city authorities to take the car through the street on the street-car rails, and by night I shall have it safely housed in my museum.

"I cannot say, just now, when the car and its contents will be opened for the inspection of the public, but that will be duly announced in my advertisements."

"Yes; and in the meantime you will have plenty of chance to stuff it with whatever you like, and then expect us to believe you found it all in the car," called out one of the spectators.

"Not on your lives! That is not what I intend to do. The chief of police and a committee of citizens selected by him will be present when I open the car, and he will guarantee that I have not stuffed it, as you say. That is all. The interior of the car will not be seen until it is viewed inside of my museum. The price of admission will be the same; ten cents."

He turned away to give some directions; but as he did so, Nick Carter's keen eyes saw that the larger of the two men who interested him cast one quick, but significant glance out of the corner of his eye at a third man whom the detective had not before noticed.

And this third man started off at once, carelessly sauntering in the direction taken by Jeremy Stone.

"Aha!" thought Nick. "There is their go-between. I wonder how much he knows? Probably mighty little. However——"

He paused abruptly, and then he also sauntered carelessly after the museum owner and the man who was following him.

Stone halted once on his way to the street car, and looked behind him, evidently disappointed because he could find no traces of the detective. But then he smiled, and muttering to himself: "There is no knowing the ways of Nick Carter," he started again for the car, boarded it, and was carried rapidly toward the center of the city.

Nevertheless, there were two who followed closely behind him.

One was the man whom Nick had noticed as being put upon his track by the tall man in the silk hat, and the other was Nick Carter himself.

Inside the car, the stranger seated himself next to Stone, and they had not proceeded far before he opened conversation with him.

Nick Carter had, in the meanwhile, seated himself so that he could see and hear all that passed between them.

"That is a mighty mysterious car, sir," began the man; and Stone smiled complacently, as he replied:

"Maybe so."

"It is merely a speculation on your part, I suppose?" continued the man.

"Sure. What else? That is my business; speculation."

"What do you expect to find in it, Mr. Stone?"

"Well, I can't say," drawled the museum owner. "I might find a house and lot, or an Anaconda mine, or a man-of-war, or a Chinese mandarin; really, I haven't thought much about it, except to make fellows like you ask questions. That's where I collect my dimes."

"Suppose it should disclose a crime?"

"Eh? A crime? Say, stranger, if it does that, it is worth twice what I gave for it. That's a good idea. I hadn't thought of that."

"It might be a regular funeral car, full of corpses, for all you know."

"Sure thing! And it might be a cattle car, filled with jackasses, for all I know, too."

"Maybe they'd have you inside, Mr. Stone, if that was the case," drawled the stranger.

Jeremy looked at him for a moment out of the corner of his eye, and then he said:

"Maybe so; but I'd be a dead one, and not a live and braying one, like you; so?"

"Seriously, Mr. Stone, what'll you take, in the way of dollars, to let me be present and see that car when it is opened? I'd be willing to give a five-dollar bill, I'm that curious."

"Would you? Well, I hadn't thought of that. Maybe it's a good idea."

"Sure it is. I have no doubt there are others who would give a like amount."

"What! When they could all wait a day or two and see the whole thing for ten cents?"

"Yes; I think so."

"Well, I don't. I don't believe there are many more of your breed in the city, mister. But say! You come around to my place this afternoon, about four, and have a nice, new five spot with you, and maybe I'll let you in. I'll think about it."

"I'll be there, Mr. Stone."

"All right. I'll expect you; and say! If you find two or three more like you, bring 'em along."

It was an inspiration which suggested this remark, and Nick Carter smiled in approval.

CHAPTER V.

BURGLARS AT THE DOOR.

"Jeremy," said the detective, when he and the museum owner were at last closeted together in the latter's private office, "what time do you expect that car will get here?"

"Oh, about two or three o'clock this afternoon. I thought I'd open the thing about four."

"I don't want you to do that."

"Eh? No? Why not?"

"I'll tell you presently. You brought me out here to boss this job for a little while, didn't you?"

"Sure. What's the matter now?"

"Well, you skip along up to the chief of police, and tell him that you have arranged for the private opening to take place at ten o'clock to-morrow morning."

"But that will throw me off my trolley for a whole day."

"And create all the more excitement."

"Maybe so. But why do you want me to do that?"

"Because I wish to examine that car before even the chief of police has an opportunity to do so. I want to know everything that is in it, and all there is about it that it is possible to find out, before others do; especially the police."

"But, man, you can't get inside the thing without breaking the seals."

"I think I can. Anyhow, I wish to try."

"When? To-night?"

"Yes. In the middle of the night, when we are sure to be undisturbed."

"Just you and me, alone?"

"Precisely. Just you and me, alone."

"B-rrr!" said Stone, with a suggestive shrug of his shoulders. "I don't think I fancy the job."

"Then you may remain at home and leave me to do it alone."

"What do you take me for? I wouldn't do that, not for a thousand."

"It strikes me that you are almost as big a jackass as the chap on the car, aren't you, Jeremy?" asked Nick, with a grin.

"You heard that, did you? What did you make of that fellow?"

"Only enough to know that I wish you to accept his five dollars, and let him in, together with the two men whom I think he will bring with him."

"But I told him to be here at four this afternoon."

"That won't make any difference. Put a placard on your door, announcing that the private opening will take place to-morrow morning at ten, and that all who have sufficient curiosity to spend five dollars for the favor will be admitted at that time for that amount. Say, also, that whatever money you take in at that time will be given to charity; that the money will be collected by a policeman, and that the opening will be in charge of the chief of police."

"By thunder, Nick, you ought to have gone into the dime-museum business; you had!"

"Will you do that?" asked the detective, smiling.

"Betcher life I will."

"All right. Go and at'end to it at once. You have got your hands full to-day to get the car here and have it properly stored."

"You're right, I have. Where shall I put it, Nick?"

"I'd move the walrus tank back and place the car directly in the center of the room."

"Correct. I'll do it. That will give us plenty of room to work to-night."

"Exactly."

* * * * * * * *

When the doors of the museum closed at half past ten that night, Nick Carter and Jeremy Stone remained inside the building.

And they were alone. Even the night watchman had been dismissed for the night, and, in order to get rid of him without leading him to suspect the purpose, he was sent away out of the city on a supposed errand for his master.

The car—the mysterious car—stood in the very center of the great room, and it looked dark and forbidding as well as terribly out of place in its new quarters.

Jeremy shuddered every time he glanced in that direction, and once, when a rat scurried across the floor under it, he started and seized the detective by the arm.

"Better go home, Jerry," said Nick. "You'll have me rattled before you get through."

"The blooming thing gives me a pain," responded Stone, shuddering.

"You'll have more than that to frighten you before the night is over, unless I am greatly mistaken," said Nick.

"How so? What do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't know; only I shouldn't be surprised if burglars tried to get in here before morning."

"Burglars! What in thunder would they want here?"

"The car," replied Nick.

"Oh! You mean——"

"I mean that if those men and those women were as deeply interested as they seemed to be, somebody will try to see the inside of that car before we do. I think the postponement of the private opening was a godsend to them, Jerry."

"Humph!" said Stone, and lapsed into silence.

The windows of the museum were thoroughly darkened so that not a ray of light could steal out and thus betray the fact that the proprietor and the detective were inside.

Midnight came, but, nevertheless, the detective still remained seated in the private office, coolly smoking a cigar, and not making a move toward the mysterious car.

"Say," said Stone, when the clock on the wall struck one, "are you going to sit here all night?"

"I'm going to sit where I am and remain quiet until about three o'clock," replied the detective.

"What in blazes are you going to do that for?"

"Because I wish to see if anybody will attempt to get into the museum to-night. If the attempt is not made before three o'clock, it won't be made at all; and I will have all the time I wish after that."

"You've been hanging around the car, looking at it, crawling under it, and climbing over it, anyhow, for the last two hours," growled Stone.

"Sure thing. And I have completed all my preliminary search. We won't have any trouble in getting inside the car without breaking the seals, and I think two hours will be all we will require."

"Do you mean to say that you have found a way to get inside it?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I'll show you before long. There is one way to get inside the car without disturbing the doors, that I already know about, and I suspect that there are two or three more ways of getting out of the car when you are once inside it, Jeremy."

"Nick, you're a crackajack."

Nick laughed.

"No, Jerry," he said, "I am just a detective who reasons things out a little before beginning work, that is all."

"I wish you'd tell me how you reasoned out a way to get inside that car. Why, just think of it. If you had come here a little sooner, and had done that reasoning before I bought the car, I might have known what was inside of it before I made the purchase."

"It is you who are the crackajack now, Jerry," laughed the detective.

"I could have gone up to the freight yard in the night," pursued Jeremy, "and I could have posted myself thoroughly before the sale came off; and——"

"And got yourself arrested and shut up in jail for your pains; eh, Jerry?"

"Maybe so."

"It is better as it is; don't you think so?"

"Maybe so. All the same, I'd like you to tell me how you found a way into the car."

"By looking for it. That is what I was crawling under it and climbing over it for. You see, Jerry, we must first start out with the proposition that the car was not built for fun."

"Sure thing."

"And next, that whoever did build it, there was a deep purpose in its construction. If the car was sent from Philadelphia to Kansas City, it was sent for the purpose

of conveying something which the man who shipped it did not wish to send openly. If I had time, I would begin at the other end of this job."

"How so?"

"Why, I would find out where and how the car was made, and how it finally got onto the P. & R. railroad tracks. That would not be a difficult matter, I think."

"Well, and then——"

"Then I'd follow up that trail until it took me somewhere. But I didn't have the time to begin at that end, so I had to figure out something for a basis to begin on; and one of the very first things I noticed about the car was that immediately under the roof, all the way around the car, there is a space which is open. It is so small, and is so cleverly concealed, that it is almost impossible to detect it, but, all the same, it is there, and it was put there to admit air to the car."

"You think so?"

"I am reasonably positive of it; and if that is so, it remains, does it not, that something or somebody expected to be inside of that car who wanted air—or, rather, who needed air?"

"I suppose so."

"Well, the next step in the field of surmise is to ask who or what could be inside the car and need air. Mind you, this is surmise, for we haven't yet been inside, but let us say that there was at least one passenger inside the car—a man or a woman; perhaps both."

"Gee!" said Jeremy.

"He, or she, or they, would need air. They would also need a means of egress and entrance to the car without disturbing the seals, wouldn't they?"

"Maybe so."

"Well, I figured it that way, and I looked for an entrance."

"And you found one?"

"Of course I found one. Haven't I just told you that?"

"And now that you've found it, what are you going to do with it?" asked Jeremy, grinning.

"I'll show you, presently. Hark! What is that? As I live, Jerry. I believe the burglars have come."

CHAPTER VI.

A MIDNIGHT VISIT TO THE CAR.

The noise which disturbed the detective while he was talking with the proprietor of the museum was made by a knocking against the outer door, and Jeremy was for answering it at once.

Nick, however, held him back.

"Wait," he said. "If that knocking is made by my prospective burglars, that is merely a preliminary move to ascertain if there is a watchman on duty. Don't answer it. We will remain quiet and see if they will attempt an entrance when they are satisfied that there is nobody here."

But, although they waited a considerable time, the knocking was not repeated, nor was there a sound to tell that any person was outside the door.

Thus another interval of time passed away, but the watchers were not disturbed; and in the due course of time the hour of three arrived.

"There," said Jeremy. "Thank Heaven it is now three o'clock. If I wait any longer, I shall be a raving maniac."

"Are you so nervous as all that?" asked Nick.

"'Tain't nervousness, it's cussedness, I reckon. Nick. I want to see the inside of that car, that's what's the matter with me."

"So do I."

"Well, let's look at it, then."

"All right. I'm ready."

"Shall I turn on the lights?"

"By no means."

"How are you going to see?"

"With this little instrument;" and he drew his electric pocket searchlight forth and showed it to Jeremy Stone.

"Look at it," he said; and he pressed the button, throwing the powerful light squarely into the museum manager's eyes.

Jeremy started back with a cry that might have been heard out in the street, and Nick laughed outright.

"You are nervous, aren't you?" he said. "Well, come ahead. I'll have pity on you now. Ho, for the car of mystery! Come on."

They left the private office, and approached the spot where the car stood, while the detective lighted the way with his pocket light.

"Now, Jerry," he said, when they paused beside it, "we must do this thing with a system. We must work with a method."

"Sure thing!" said Jeremy.

"I'll show you something which has not been discovered by the people who have examined this car while it was in the freight yards."

"What is that?"

"Well, for example, look at those castings;" and Nick threw his light upon the one piece of cast iron after another, which had been employed in the manufacture of the car.

"What of 'em?" asked Jeremy.

"They are homemade, that is all. The man who built the car made his own castings. He did not care to apply to a regular maker for them; or else he knew that he could not get them if he did—or, what is more likely, that he would be traced from them, if he procured them in that manner."

"So he made 'em himself?"

"Precisely. Now, Jeremy, let me ask you a question."

"A dozen, if you like, if you will only hurry."

"If you had made this car, and had wished to make a door through which you could enter and leave it without being observed, where is the most likely place for you to select for such a door?"

"Humph! You can search me!"

"In the roof? In the floor? In one of the sides, or both? Or at the ends?"

"I should say in one of the ends."

"Sure. Now, which end?"

"Hey?"

"I asked you which end?"

"Ends are both alike, ain't they?"

"Yes."

"Then it wouldn't make much difference which end, would it?"

"Certainly it would. Suppose the car happened to be the last one on a train of freight cars, and the end in which your door was placed happened to be the one next to the caboose?"

"Gee! That's so."

"You'd want the door on the other end rather badly, wouldn't you?"

"Betcher life."

"So you would figure rather carefully to have the door at the forward end, eh? That is, as the car was bound westward, you would want your door at the west end of the car, wouldn't you?"

"Maybe so. That is, yes; of course."

"This car is still lying east and west, in here, but it has been turned around since it left the freight yard. They probably ran it onto a Y, before they brought it here."

"Sure. But, say!"

"Well?"

"How did the fellow who built it know that they wouldn't run it on a Y half a dozen times before the car got to Kansas City?"

"He didn't. He probably took his chances on that point; unless, as I believe, he took the trouble to study thoroughly every rod of the railroad the car would travel in coming here, before he attempted to ship the car. However, I figured that he did that very thing, and so I looked at what had been the west end of the car, for the door I was sure I would find there. And, Jeremy, I found it just where I expected it."

Jeremy thrust his hands deep into his pockets, turned, and started as if to return to the office.

"Where are you going?" asked Nick.

"I'm going way back and sit down, I am. When you get ready to show me that door and the inside of that car, you just send over a messenger boy and announce the fact. Of all the aggravating galoots I ever saw, you take the cake, you do. Here I am, busting wide open with curiosity, and a-standing here trying to be patient, and you doing nothing but preaching. I can't stand it any longer. When you are ready to see the inside of that car, I'm with you, but if you stand there and talk about it any longer, I'll bust. Honest, I will, Nick."

"I was just giving you a little of your own medicine," said Nick.

"My own medicine! How do you mean?"

"Weren't you the most delighted man on earth when you could stand out there in the old freight yard today as the sole and only owner of this freight car, and tell the people who were devoured by curiosity that it wouldn't be opened till you were good and ready to have it done?"

"I suppose I was."

"Well, I am, for the time being, the sole and only owner; see?"

"Confound you!"

"Swear away if you like it and enjoy it."

"Will you show me the inside of that car?"

"Sure."

"When?"

"Right now."

"Go ahead, then."

Nick led the way around to the end of the car, carrying a chair in his hand as he did so.

The chair he placed on the floor to use as a step. Then he stepped back and turned to Stone again.

"It is your car, isn't it, Jerry?" he asked.

"Of course it's my car. What's the matter now?"

"Nothing; only you should be the first to enter it."

"Hey? What's that? The first to enter it? Well, not much!"

"Why not? Are you afraid?"

"Afraid? Who's afraid? I ain't!"

"All right. Get up on this chair."

"What for?"

"So you can open the door."

"But I don't know how to open the da—— infernal door. There, you almost made me swear."

"I'll show you how to open it."

"Go ahead yourself. I'm no hog. I'm willing to look second, I am."

"Get on the chair, Jerry, and open the door."

Jeremy complied, so far as getting upon the chair was concerned; but there he paused.

"Say!" he said. "Suppose there's an infernal machine attached to that door, and the whole blasted push should blow up when I open the door; what then?"

"That is a chance you have to take," replied Nick, with a chuckle. "Surely you won't ask me to run that risk when you are here to do it, will you?"

"All right. Where is your darned door? Show it to me. I'll open it if it blows a hole plumb through the bottom of Kansas City."

"That would be a new kind of a boom for the town, wouldn't it. Are you ready, Jerry?"

"Yep. Fire away."

"Here! Take the light. The door opens by pressing a spring at the bottom of the car—at least, I suppose it does. I haven't tried it yet. When I press the spring and the door opens, throw your light inside, look around, and tell me what you see."

"All right. Let her go."

Nick pressed the spring, and, sure enough, a door large enough to admit a man fell open inside the car.

Jeremy, who was standing on the chair ready for action, uttered an exclamation of surprise, and then threw the glare from the detective's searchlight through the opening.

For an instant after that he stood perfectly motionless and silent, and then, with a loud cry, he dropped the light, and reeled from the chair into the arms of the detective.

CHAPTER VII.

BEAUTIFUL INDEED! BUT DEAD!

Jeremy Stone was not unconscious when he fell, and a glance told Nick Carter that nothing more serious than fright was the matter with him.

The detective barely waited to deposit the half-fainting man on the floor, when he seized the searchlight and leaped upon the chair himself.

Instantly the interior of the mysterious car was revealed to him, and he did not wonder that Jeremy had been startled almost out of his wits, although he himself only smiled at what he saw.

Still, it was gruesome enough, at best.

He wished now that he had not carried the joke so far with Jeremy, for he had only insisted upon his looking inside; first, because he really expected to find nothing more interesting than an empty car, with, perhaps, a chest or two inside; a chest or two which might contain the horrors which would be there. He certainly did not look forward to any such sight as greeted his eyes.

What Nick did see appeared to be the interior of a beautifully furnished sleeping room—small, to be sure, but sufficiently large, evidently, for the uses to which it had been put.

In the center of the room was a small, round table. In one corner—the far one from Nick's point of view—was a bed. The remaining articles of furniture will be noticed later on, for it was none of these which had so startled the proprietor of the museum, and which at the first glance appalled the detective himself.

It was the group around the table, and the figure on the bed which had made Jeremy Stone drop the light and fall into Nick Carter's arms—figures which at first glance, and in the sharp light cast by the instrument in Nick's hands, appeared to be human, although it was at once plain that if they were human, they no longer lived.

"Corpses!" had been Jeremy Stone's first thought; and it would also have been Nick Carter's, had he not already figured upon such a possibility, and decided in his own mind that such a discovery was unlikely.

He turned on the chair and glanced down at Jeremy with a smile.

The proprietor's teeth were chattering, and he was trembling as if with a palsy.

"Come down from there! For God's sake, come down!" he gasped; but Nick continued to smile.

"Brace up, Jerry," he said. "There is nothing to frighten you. These are not living men."

"No; but by the Lord Harry, they're dead ones, ain't they?"

"No; not that, either, unless I make a great mistake. But I'm going inside to find out."

"What do you think they are?"

"Wax figures, I take it; although I may be mistaken."

He did not pause to say more, but stepped through the door inside the car, and approached the table, around which four figures were seated, as if engaged in a game of cards.

As he drew nearer he was conscious of a heavy odor, as of spices unknown to him, although not at all unpleasant to the sense of smell. He remembered now that he had noticed it also, at the instant when the car door was opened, but the fright of his companion had driven it, for the moment, from his mind.

He noticed, also, with that quick comprehension of detail, which was second nature to him, that the cards on the round table seemed to have been fastened there, as if adjusted in their places by wax or glue, and that the lifelike-looking features were sustained in their respective places by a network of wires which had been wound round and round them for the purpose.

And as he advanced, the strength of the odor increased until, as he came near enough to have touched the figures, it was almost overpowering.

And then he made a startling and well-nigh appalling discovery.

The figures were not made of wax. They were not dummies. They were——

He turned suddenly and returned to the door, at which the face of Jeremy was already appearing.

"Stay where you are, Jerry!" he commanded, in a voice which Stone instantly recognized as a serious one. "It is worse than I supposed."

"What is it?" asked Stone, in a breathless whisper.

"Heaven only knows. I can't answer that question until I have investigated a little further; but I don't want you inside to bother me now. Stay where you are."

"All right."

"Have you got half a dozen incandescent bulbs with insulated wire on them which we can attach to the chandelier and lead in here, so I can have plenty of light?"

"Yes; a hundred if you like. We use 'em all over the place."

"Then get me all that the chandelier will accommodate—nine. I want to throw a lot of light on this subject."

"Are they corpses, after all, Nick?"

"Yes; I think they are, Jerry; but so perfectly embalmed that even now I am not certain they are not wax, and that the whole thing is a magnificent hoax."

"Hoax be blowed!"

"Get those bulbs and stop talking," ordered Nick.

Jeremy ran away to obey, and returned after a short absence with an armful of bulbs and wires.

A stepladder was then brought, and within a few moments the ends of the insulated wires were adjusted to the chandelier, and Nick soon had nine good electric lights burning inside the freight car.

In order to divide the light from them as evenly as possible, he had Jeremy bring him also a hammer and some staples, and he thus fastened three of the lights to either side of the car, one at either end, and one directly over the middle of it.

"There is scarcely a shadow in the place now," he said to Jeremy, who was standing just outside the door, gazing in open-mouthed horror and amazement at the sights he saw. "Will you come inside?"

"Not on your life. I'm near enough to that where I am."

"Well, stay where you are; but if you speak to me until I give you permission to talk, I will close the door and leave you outside alone."

"Oh, I'll be dumb. But say, Nick, are they corpses?"

"Yes, they are."

"What's that one on the bed?"

"I haven't looked yet. It is covered by a sheet, as you see."

"Well, look and see what it is, and then I'll shut up."

"Hush, Jerry," said Nick. "You must be silent now. I must do the rest of this in my own way, and I must not be interrupted."

Jeremy Stone lapsed into silence without another word, and Nick turned again toward the interior of the car.

The car was of the ordinary thirty-four-foot pattern; in fact, it was of the same dimensions of an ordinary freight car. Every inch of the roof and sides of the car was covered with silk plush of a rich amber color, and this had been fastened in place by brass tacks arranged diamond shape, while pendent from each tack was a button and tassel of the same quality and hue as the drapery.

This arrangement gave the inside of the car the appearance of being upholstered, although a touch of his fingers told the detective that there was nothing between the silk plush and the boards which formed the inner casing of the car.

At the sides, and at the far end of the car—that is, in three places in all, were brackets for the support of small lamps, and each of the lamps they held had the appearance of having been in use.

In the far corner, on the left-hand side, as has al-

ready been mentioned, was a brass bed, of the three-quarter size, and the trappings and furnishings of the bed seemed, at that first glance, to be of the finest material.

The bed, too, seemed to be "made up," although on top of the figured silk coverlid some sort of a substance, or body, was resting. What it was, Nick could not yet determine, for it was completely hidden from view by a white sheet which was spread over it. Nevertheless, it plainly showed the outlines of still another human form; and Nick had not a doubt that it was.

There were two bed couches, folded shut, and in perfect order in the car, and they were upholstered in leather, and of the latest devices. One of these was at one side of the car, near the regular door, which the reader knows was sealed on the outside; the other was nearer the end at which the detective had entered.

There were also several comfortable chairs arranged about the roomy space, and there was a case of well-filled bookshelves hanging against one of the walls.

At two places through the length of the car, heavy plush curtains, provided with loops and buttons so that they might be readily fastened together, had been arranged. These were now drawn aside and fastened at the sides of the car, but a glance at them showed that the interior of the strange apartment could, by their use, readily be divided into three separate compartments, thus leaving the brass bedstead in one, and a bed couch, which could be opened and made serviceable for two people, in each of the others.

As Nick ran his eyes again along the sides of the car he discovered where there were places in the silk plush drapery where it was tied down into place.

He crossed to one of these and untied the knot which held it, thus revealing the fact that they were but coverings for sections of the side of the car, about the size of windows, and which might readily be removed and used as such, for obtaining air, and for the purpose of viewing the scenery as the occupants of the car were passing; and slipped down between the plush and the sides of the car, under these windows, were screens which might be adjusted at the whim of the occupants.

The floor of the car was covered from end to end by a heavy Axminster carpet, which had been evidently fitted with great care, and was tacked securely into place. Over the carpet, at intervals, were small rugs; and there were foot rests, hassocks, and numerous articles of decoration on every hand.

"What do you think of it all, Jeremy?" asked Nick, when he had taken in these details, and as he was about to pass to the bed whereon the figure was laid under the sheet. But Jeremy merely shook his head; he did not reply, and, after waiting a moment, Nick crossed to the brass bedstead, and with a quick motion threw back the sheet.

Then he started in wondering awe and amazement, for he found himself looking upon a beautiful face; beautiful indeed—but dead.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CORPSES IN THE CAR.

After that there followed an hour when Nick Carter did not again speak to his companion, who remained in the doorway at the end of the car.

He occupied the time in minutely searching every inch of space which the strange car contained; and he began it and conducted it with that same careful regard to system which had always signalized the work of the great detective.

After lifting the sheet from the face of the form on the bed, he replaced it again, and at once returned to the other end of the car. There he began to study what he saw.

Pressed closely into one corner of the doorsill he found a particle of red clay which had escaped the attention of the person whose duty it had been to keep the car clean; also, in two places near the door, he discovered the marks of fingers against the silk plush.

Two or three hairpins; the same number of buttons of various sizes; a stick pin and other articles of the same class and character were in evidence all over the place, but they told him nothing of importance, and had, he believed, very little bearing upon the general case in hand.

He spent a long time at the table where the four figures were seated, as if engaged in a game of cards; but even there he was careful to touch nothing—to disturb nothing.

Two of the figures at the table were men; two were women. All were approaching middle age, which is to say that all of them, as nearly as he was able to judge, were—or, rather, had been between forty and fifty years old.

The figure on the bed, covered from sight by the sheet, was that of a young woman who had not yet attained her majority.

Nick judged that she might have been between nineteen and twenty-one years old, but that she certainly was not more than that; perhaps even younger.

From the cursory examination he was enabled to devote to the four bodies at the table, he was unable to determine how they had died, save that he was satisfied in his own mind that death had resulted from the use of some quick poison administered to them.

The perfect state of preservation in which the bodies were found was what amazed him most, and he was not surprised that with his first view into the car, and with the imperfect light he had employed at the time, he should have leaped to the conclusion that they were merely wax figures. Wax figures they were not, however. They were the bodies of men and women who had once been warm with life and animation; and seated in the chairs at the table, with the playing cards in their hands and their bodies arranged in natural attitudes, they appeared as lifelike and real as if they were actually engaged in the game before them.

The women were still arrayed in their jewelry. Both were women whose faces showed that they were not unfamiliar with the gas-lighted and the bohemian side of life in great cities. And yet there were evidences of refinement and culture everywhere, too. The faces had possessed beauty, even if it was of a reckless kind; and the hands showed that their owners had been entirely unused to any sort of work with them.

Their costumes were elegant. The material was of the finest texture and after the latest fashion, and the hair of each of them showed that it had evidently been dressed by a person who was experienced in the art.

From their boots to the jeweled combs in their hair they gave evidence of wealth, studied care, even luxury.

And they were—who can tell the age of a woman who has ready at hand all the arts of the toilet? In round figures, they were approximately forty years old; and if gray hairs had ever appeared on the heads of either,

they had long ago been harked back to youthful colors by the use of chemicals.

And the men?

They were, to all appearance, men of the world, worldly. One was heavy-set, beetle-browed, swarthy, and—in death—wolfishly fierce in suggestion, with coal-black hair, here and there relieved by a tinge of gray, a heavy black mustache, and with shirt front, fingers, and watch chain Bejeweled as only a man after his pattern can decorate himself on occasion.

The other was a man of different type altogether. He was younger, although he also seemed to have passed the forty mark; but his hair was light; his long mustache was blond and perfectly trained, and his features were handsome, although dissipated.

A single diamond of great brilliancy gleamed upon one finger of the hand which held the cards before him, and the other hand rested on the table at his side, and still held, as if ready to raise it to his lips, a half-smoked cigar.

Indeed, had it not been for the wire guys and stays which held the bodies in place at the table, the entire appearance of the scene would have suggested to the beholder that some awful blight had struck them while they were engaged in their game, and had rendered them lifeless so suddenly that not one of them had had time or opportunity to change a position or a gesture.

Nick Carter passed around them on every side, studying them from every point of vantage he could obtain; but he could discover little more than has been already told.

Here and there, on the men, there was a pocket into which he could insert his fingers without disturbing the body at all, but, as he expected, such investigation led to no discovery whatever.

The pockets were empty, as he believed all of them would be found to be.

So far he had not discovered a scrap of paper in the car; so far he had found nothing of any description which would supply a clew to the identity of the men and women, and he had not a doubt that the person who had arranged the tableau with such exceeding care had taken like precautions to remove every means of identification. And that person had used extraordinary care in the preparations."

The table at which the bodies were seated, the chairs upon which they rested—in fact, every movable article in the car, had been fastened in its place so firmly that no jarring or jolting could displace it.

Even the cards themselves, as has already been stated, were fastened to the top of the table and to the fingers of the dead men and women who held them.

The scene was extraordinary, unreal, almost fantastical.

With the figure on the bed, all was different. The body was that of a young woman who had been wonderfully beautiful in life—a young woman with a perfect figure; with hair as dark as brown hair, which is something less than black, can be; with an oval face, perfect in contour, exquisite in feature, delicate, high-bred, and patrician in every line.

She was a young woman, whose eyes, if they could have opened, would have been round and full and soft, and as dark and as lustrous as sloes; whose lips had been as red as cherries and whose skin was once as smooth and soft as a beautiful woman's skin can be. And her attire was as if she had dressed for a great function just before she became the bride of death. The gown she wore might have cost a thousand dollars; the jewels at her throat were worth many thousands, and the rings upon her fingers as much more.

"Plainly," thought the detective, as he looked upon her, "whoever it was who arranged this terrible scene, he had more thought for its perfection of detail than for the value of jewels and diamonds."

But it was not this, which has already been described in such detail, which had caused him to start back in such consternation and amazement when he first removed the sheet covering and looked upon the figure on the bed.

If he were in doubt concerning the means by which the remaining four of the occupants of the car had come to their death, there was no room left for doubt in this case.

The jeweled hilt of a Spanish dagger protruded from the young woman's bosom, directly over her heart, and if the hilt itself gave correct evidence of the length of the weapon, it must, when driven home, have pinned its victim to the bed whereon she was lying.

There was nowhere any evidence of blood. And yet, also, as in the other cases, that same masterly art of embalming had been employed. The body was in a perfect state of preservation.

But nowhere was there even a suggestion of a clew concerning the identity of the five corpses in the car.

Nick turned away from the bed after drawing the sheet again into place over the silent form.

For a moment after that he stood in silent contemplation of the several articles he had discovered and collected, which have already been mentioned—that is, the hairpins and the few trinkets.

After studying them for a while, he shook his head, and then carefully returned them to the places where they were found.

Next he crossed to the lamps, one after another, and devoted considerable study to them, carefully removing the chimneys, turning the wicks up and down, inspecting the tops of the lamps, where they were exposed, and also the sides, top, and floor of the car near them.

The chairs, and the carpet and rugs on the floor, he also examined with great care, using his large magnifying glass. Next, he opened the couch beds, devoted a short study to each of them, and closed them again, leaving them as he had found them.

And then, with his glass, he went carefully along the sides of the car, touching with great particularity upon every place where the hand of one of the occupants of the car might have been brought into contact with it.

At last he turned toward Jeremy Stone, who still remained in the open door at the end of the car.

Then he removed the electric bulbs from the places where he had placed them and passed them outside to his waiting companion, and at last, with a sigh, he passed outside and closed the door behind him.

As Nick stepped down from the chair to the floor of the museum, he discovered that, standing just behind Jeremy, were five grim and silent men, all with revolvers in their hands, covering him.

CHAPTER IX.

DOCTOR QUARTZ, THE SECOND.

"Put up your hands!" ordered one of the men quietly; and Jeremy Stone, who had no idea of their proximity until he heard the words behind him, started as if he were shot. But ere he could turn, the same quiet voice added:

"If you turn, Mr. Stone, I will kill you where you stand."

But Nick Carter did not propose to put up his hands and surrender without a struggle, not even when the odds were so great as they were then.

When the order came, he did put up his hands, suddenly and quickly; but the very motion of putting them up threw into their grasp the butts of the small but deadly weapons he always carried in his sleeves whenever he expected to work within the realm of danger.

Nor did he hesitate to make use of them now.

The mere motion of throwing his hands into the air brought his two weapons within his grasp, and as each one was automatic in its use, the words addressed to Jeremy Stone were not fully uttered before the air was filled with the sound of a veritable fusillade of pistol shots.

And Nick Carter's unerring marksmanship, moreover, enabled him to make use of this means of defense without dealing death around him.

He could wound without killing. He could drive tacks with bullets from these toylike pistols at thirty paces—and he could drive them with the rapidity of counting.

The man who ordered him to throw up his hands received the first bullet.

It grazed his temple, and it whirled him around as if he had been hit with a club, and he pitched to the floor like a log. The others evidently had relied upon the awe which their leveled weapons would create, and had had no thought of using them.

At all events, not one of them fired.

Three of them were, in fact, down before they could have had an opportunity to do so; two with grazed temples, and the other with a bullet through his shoulder.

The remaining two turned to escape, but pitched to the floor with bullets in their legs before they had taken half a dozen steps. During the *mêlée*, which lasted not more than three or four seconds, there was not a shot fired, save by the detective himself.

"The first one of you who tries to raise his weapon to use it, I will shoot through the head," Nick said calmly. "And now, Jerry," he added, "while I keep an eye on them to see that they obey me, you relieve them of their weapons."

Nick scarcely found himself confronted by the five strange foes, ere they were one and all on the floor of the museum, incapable of inflicting damage upon him.

And Jeremy Stone lost no time, under Nick's orders, in procuring ropes with which the five intruders were soon bound and helpless. The prisoners were carried by Nick and the proprietor to the private office, and given such immediate care as their wounds required.

Not one of them, however, was seriously hurt.

"Gee!" exclaimed Jeremy, looking at them, and rubbing his hands together in glee as he contemplated the advertising he would get out of the events of the night, "I ought to do a smashing business for the rest of this season, if this night's work counts for anything at all."

"Doubtless you will," said Nick grimly; and then he turned to the men he had captured so strangely.

"You fellows came here at just the moment when I wanted you most," he said coldly. "I expected you earlier, but, after waiting for you till three o'clock, I thought I'd go ahead without you. But you aren't, any of you, much good, after all, are you?"

The leader, who had recovered from the effects of the blow made by the bullet against the side of his head, and whom Nick addressed, scowled savagely, but made no reply.

"What a pity it is that you are all merely tools; that not one of you is a principal," continued the detective. "Now, my man, you will have to talk. If not now, then at some later time, and you can save yourself a whole lot of trouble by doing it now. For instance, I don't think that I care very much about any of you, and you are more in the way than an advantage to me just now. Do you understand that?"

"I heard what you said," growled the man.

"Well, if you talk now, and give up all you know, I shouldn't wonder if I had much rather you would go about your business for the present, and try to hold up somebody else, than to hamper myself by taking you in. Do you understand that?"

"I heard what you said."

"Good! You're getting sensible, aren't you? Now, do you know what is inside that car?"

"Only what I could see; and I couldn't see very much."

"Well, what did you see?"

"A lot of wax figgers."

"Exactly. Now, what did you expect to find there?"

"I didn't expect to find anything there, because I didn't expect to look to see what was there."

"Oh! You didn't, eh?"

"No."

"What did you expect to do?"

"Blow the blooming thing to blazes."

"What! Blow up the car?"

"Sure, and the hull shootin' match as well."

"I reckon, Mister Man, that you can talk good English if you care to do so, and you may as well do it. I will understand you better. Who sent you here?"

"A goggle-eyed galoot, who gave us each a hundred dollars to come, and agreed to give us each another hundred apiece, if we returned after blowing up this shebang."

"You were to put dynamite, or something, under the car; is that it?"

"Yes; that's it. Dynamite. It's over there now, all ready, and I might have blown it up a dozen times while you were inside, only I ain't no murderer, and killing you was not in this job; so as there were only two of you, I reckoned that I could hold you up, get you out of harm's way, and then do the job."

"I see. That was very kind of you. What you mean is, that if you just blew up the place without killing anybody, your chances of escape would be much better than if you committed two murders in doing it; eh?"

"Have it that way if you want to. It don't hurt me any."

"Where were you to meet 'the goggle-eyed galoot' who was to give you the extra money after the job was done?"

"In the woman's waiting room, down at the Union Station."

"Were you all to go in a body?"

"No. I was to go alone, and collect the boodle."

"What time?"

"At six o'clock this morning. But say, it won't do you any good to find out all that, for the fellow won't be waiting. He'd know if there was an explosion here, and he'll be mighty shy, I reckon, if he don't hear one."

"Where do you live?"

"Here, in Kansas City. I've got a police record. If you want to find out all about me, all you've got to do is to go to the police department. You see, I'm taking you at your word, thinking that maybe you'll let me go. I'm a crook, and so are these guns here. Some of us are wanted, and some of us ain't. I am, as it happens."

"Did the man who sent you here tell you what was in that car?"

"Not a tell about it."

"Will you all agree to get out of town, and stay out for a year at least, if I decide to let you go?"

"Sure thing."

"Very well; two of your companions can walk, and two are a little lame. You can tell them to light out now. I want you to stay."

"Aren't you going to let me go, too?"

"Yes, when you have pointed out the man who sent you here. You can do it, and you've got to do it."

"All right, boss. I'm game to carry out the contract; only you can bet that after I have done it, I won't come back here in no year—or ten years. I'll take my chances against all the coppers between the two oceans, but Doctor Quartz is a proposition I don't care to tackle, after I've got him down on me once."

"Who?" demanded Nick.

"Doctor Quartz. That's his name."

"Gee!" said Jeremy Stone, and he rubbed his hands together harder than ever.

"Is that the name of the man who sent you here?" asked Nick.

"No; but it's the name of the man who sent the goggle-eyed galoot to us, or I miss my guess. This ain't the first job I've tackled for him."

"Doctor Quartz, eh? A second Doctor Quartz."

"That's what he calls himself. Doctor Quartz, Second."

"Humph! Does he live here in Kansas City?"

"Yes."

"Do you know where?"

"Sure."

"Good! You shall take me there."

"Will I! Not much! I'll show you the house, all right, but I'd rather be railroaded to prison right now, for ten years, than take you there. You hear me?"

CHAPTER X.

FACE TO FACE.

Nick Carter was confident, when he had finished with the man, that he had told him all he knew about the car, or the people who had sent him there to blow it up.

His story, in a word, was to the effect that he had been approached by the man whom he described as the goggle-eyed galoot, and offered the price he had stated, on condition that he would get a gang around him, break into the museum, and blow up the car so thoroughly that it would be effectually destroyed. He had agreed to do it, and had picked up his assistants for the matter among the slums of the city. They had arrived at the door of the museum at a little before three, but had determined that there were people inside, and had therefore delayed their entrance until after four.

Being expert burglars, they found no difficulty in gaining admittance to the building, and as Nick Carter was already inside the car, absorbed in his investigations, and Jeremy Stone was so intent upon watching him at his work, their presence in the building had not been suspected until the moment when Nick discovered them as he leaped down from the car to the chair and thence to the floor.

His four companions were sent away as Nick intended they should be; and then the detective turned to Jeremy Stone.

"Jerry," he said, "I will tell you now what I discovered in that car. I will tell it in the form of a story so you will understand it better. Big Jim Gleason, here, burglar and all-around crook, may listen if he likes, for I have no doubt he will be interested; and it will show him how nearly he came to being up against it much harder than he ever expected to be. I have no doubt, also, but that I can make rather good use of, Big Jim, a little later on."

"Maybe so," was Jeremy's comment.

"The mention of the name of Doctor Quartz, the second, has supplied the missing link in the chain of circumstantial evidence I have dug up from inside that car; and, in a word, I read the whole thing something like this:

"The person who prepared that car coolly committed five murders to accomplish his ultimate purpose, and I have no doubt he did it as coolly as he might have manufactured wax figures for the same purpose; and he might have done so, if I am correct, and have carried out his design quite as thoroughly.

"The person who prepared that car as I found it when I entered it, did so, intending that the car should be finally opened by the authorities, in this city, as it will be, at ten o'clock this morning. He intended that the car should remain where it did until it had aroused the curiosity of the entire city—as it did. He intended that it should be sold at auction, perhaps, or, at least, it should fall into the hands of some person who would deliver it and its contents into the hands of the authorities.

"He intended, according to my method of reasoning, that this should be his method of striking terror among certain people whom he wished to reach, and, therefore, we may conclude that there are other persons in this city who are as deeply interested in the car and its contents as he is himself.

"I believe that the interior of the car, with all its appurtenances, including the bodies that are there, comprises simply a rehearsal—or, shall I say, a reproduction—of a tragedy which has already taken place. That is to say, some time in the past, the four people whose bodies are seated at the table, apparently engaged in a game of cards, have murdered a young girl not unlike the one whose body we found on the bed, under the sheet, and that, having driven a dagger through her heart while she was lying, no doubt drugged and unconscious on the bed, they calmly sat down to drink and gamble, in the presence of the corpse.

"And doubtless the room in which the crime was committed was not unlike the interior of that car, although, of course, much larger.

"The manufacturer of that car, and the man who arranged its interior, doubtless knew, or at least he guessed,

something of the scenes which surrounded her death, and it has been his effort here to reproduce, as far and as closely as possible, every detail of that tragedy.

"This seems like rather a far-fetched conclusion for me to deduct, but the entire appearance of the interior of the car suggests it at once; and when I hear Big Jim speak of the principal who is behind the man who sent him here, and refer to that person as Doctor Quartz, the second, I am convinced of the correctness of my view; for that is exactly the sort of thing which the original Doctor Quartz would have taken delight in doing.

"The car has not been used since it was furnished as we found it. It was sealed up before it was shipped, and I am certain that it was not entered or opened since that time, until I opened the door at the end, a few hours ago.

"The little trinkets which I found upon the floor of the car were thrown there, to give it all a more perfect appearance of reality. The lamps at the sides of the car were lighted only once, and then the wicks were turned high up in order to make them smoke and thus give them the appearance of having been used.

"The finger marks on the plush near the door were made by the man who arranged the car, and not by any one of the prisoners in that car. There is not a finger on any of them which could have made the same marks. If you had studied the science of thumb and finger marks, you would know this to be true.

"The jewelry, the diamonds, and all things apparently of great value in the car, are merely good imitations, put there to produce an effect.

"Somewhere, at some time, two men and two women —those same two men and two women, perhaps, although I am not certain of that—have murdered a girl under circumstances which are about the same as those represented in the car. The man who fixed this car knows about it, and is familiar with all the circumstances. The men and the women who committed the murder, if they were not those whose corpses are now in the car—or, if they are the ones, then some other persons who will be affected by the disclosure thus made—are now in Kansas City, and it was the purpose of the one who prepared that car, to so terrorize them, that, through their terror, he could accomplish some infinitely greater purpose which he has in view.

"If the original Doctor Quartz were alive, I should at once say that he had expended a few thousand dollars after this manner, for the purpose of extorting hundreds of thousands, or perhaps millions, from the people he intended to terrorize by this means.

"He would have selected just such a method as this one. He would have taken all that exquisite care to have perfected every detail, and would have spared no expense in carrying out his plan, once it was matured. Does it seem absurd to you? If you had known Doctor Quartz as I knew him, you would not think so.

"Now, Big Jim tells us that somewhere here in the city there is a second Doctor Quartz. If that is so, then I can finish the story, for such a man could call himself by that name, only if he was heir, in some way, to the vast knowledge and power for evildoing which Doctor Quartz possessed. I know that he left behind him a written chart of all his secrets, and I know that his charts and diaries and all his possessions relating to science were hidden somewhere, and were intended for some person; but I could never find them, or the person, either.

"The finished story, as I would make it—out of nothing you might say, for it would appear as nothing to one who had not had experience with that wonderful man and his methods—merely provides that there are two men and two women—husbands and wives they are, as demonstrated by the wedding rings—here in Kansas City, who have inherited a fortune by the murder of some young woman, and that they are now enjoying that fortune. Doctor Quartz knows about it, and he has decided that he wants that fortune, or at least the greater part of it. He has not gone to them and demanded it, because he is more artistic. He has thought it better to speak silently, so that he will not appear in the matter."

"But if all that is true, or even if a part of it is true," said Jeremy, "why should he wish to blow the car to pieces after he has taken so much trouble to prepare it?"

"I don't think he did," replied Nick slowly. "I don't think that Big Jim's Doctor Quartz had anything to do with sending the man to Jim, who engaged him to blow up the car. I think that fellow was sent by the woman who went to the freight yard to see the car. I think that Doctor Quartz is merely waiting patiently at his home, to have the car opened in the morning, according to your announcement; but that, in some manner, the people who are threatened by the disclosure have learned something of what is to happen. They may not know of the contents of the car, but they have connected Doctor Quartz with it somehow, and they are afraid."

"Maybe so."

Nick looked at his watch and then turned to Big Jim.

"We will go now," he said.

"Where to?" asked Jim.

"To the house of Doctor Quartz. Come!"

It was almost seven o'clock when Nick Carter mounted the steps of the house to which he had been directed, and rang the bell. Big Jim waited on a near-by corner.

When the door opened, the detective could barely repress an exclamation of surprise, for the man who stood before him was so exactly like that other man, now dead, whom he had known for the greatest criminal of his age and time.

There was the same strong and handsome features; the same square jaw, smoothly shaven face, piercing, brilliant eyes; the same wide, high forehead, denoting intense intellectuality; the same massive frame, not large, but compact; the same intense air; the same calm, superior smile; the same evidence of good breeding—ah! it was all the same.

"Doctor Quartz, I believe," said Nick coolly.

"Yes," replied the man in the doorway, in a voice which made the detective start as much as other likenesses had done. "Will you step inside?"

Nick followed him into the office, and then, without taking the chair that was offered to him, he said:

"Doctor, the chief of police would like to see you this morning."

The doctor wheeled sharply in his tracks, only to find that he was confronted by a pair of revolvers, one of which was aimed at his heart and the other at his forehead.

"You see," said Nick, smiling, "I get you, no matter which way you attempt to jump—so take my advice and don't jump. You look so much like your namesake, now dead, that I should not stop to bandy words with you."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders and smiled; and when he smiled, his face was transformed to a thing of

beauty. Nick marveled that a man could be so handsomely attractive.

"Isn't this rather a high-handed proceeding?" he asked lazily. "What has happened? What is the matter?"

"The car at Jeremy Stone's museum has been opened," replied the detective coldly; "and it may interest you to know that I am Nick Carter."

CHAPTER XI.

CONCLUSION.

"Put away your pistols, Mr. Carter," said the doctor quietly. "You will have no occasion to use them. No? Well, then——"

He spoke quite coolly until the break in the sentence, and when that came, he dropped like a bolt of lightning to the floor, and at the same time darted forward, so that Nick, who had not really considered the necessity of shooting at all, was totally unprepared.

The result was that the next instant the detective found himself grappling with the man, and that without having fired a shot.

And now he could not. He saw in an instant that it was a mere question of strength between them, and dropping his pistols to the floor, he seized the doctor in his own muscular and wonderfully powerful arms; and then, standing together in something which nearly resembled what is known as the side hold in wrestling, with Nick at the upper hold, the two men strained together in the center of the room.

And then there followed an intense silence. Not a motionless or an inactive one, but a thoroughly strenuous one, for both men were straining with all the might in them to subdue each other; and yet neither moved out of his tracks on the floor—neither gave to or forced upon the other an inch of advantage. The fact was that they were so evenly matched, that it was as if two silent and motionless bodies were standing there, locked together like two statues carved in marble.

Five minutes passed in this way; and then the doctor said quietly:

"Will you declare a truce for a moment? You need not break your hold. I wish to say something."

"Yes; what is it?"

"You are stronger than I thought."

"Yes."

"I have heard about you. I have, in fact, known considerable about you. I have only struggled with you to satisfy myself that I had heard the truth concerning you. If I had thrown you, I should have permitted you to rise uninjured, and afterward have gone with you to the chief of police. What do you desire of me?"

"To arrest you for five murders. The truce is up now, doctor. I am going to attack again."

With a quick motion, as the detective ceased speaking, he threw one foot behind the physician's and so tripped him. They fell to the floor together, Nick on the top, and in an instant he had snapped handcuffs upon the doctor's wrists.

"You see," said the doctor, "I did not resist that time. I will go with you. But you have had all your trouble for nothing."

"Indeed!" said Nick.

"Yes. You have arrested the wrong person."

"I have heard that sort of talk before," said the detective.

"Open the door behind you, Mr. Carter, and you will discover the real murderers. I captured them myself during the night, and was on the point of telephoning for a carriage to take them to the chief when you arrived."

Nick opened the door as he was directed to do, and seated just beyond it, tightly bound in two chairs, he discovered two women, one of whom he instantly recognized as the angular, sour-visaged woman of the freight yard. Both were apparently asleep; both were, in fact, unconscious.

The other woman gave the detective a start when he looked at her, for, save that she was older, she presented almost a counterpart of the young woman on the bed in the freight car.

"There is a telephone over there in the corner," said the doctor, smiling. "You can send to police headquarters directly from here."

Then he shrugged his shoulders and lapsed into silence, nor would he speak again, despite every inducement that Nick could offer.

* * * * * * *

At the police station, it was demonstrated that Nick's surmises concerning the dead occupants of the mysterious freight car were in the main correct, although Doctor Quartz adopted a method of silence in his defense, which nothing could penetrate; but the affair ended by all of them being charged with the five murders, and all of them were placed under indictment.

Of the car itself, very little more than was already known could be ascertained; but the authorities of Kansas City at once retained the services of Nick Carter to solve the mystery to its core.

THE END.

In the next issue of this weekly—No. 788, to be published on February 3d—will appear the account of one of Nick Carter's most extraordinary cases. It is in this that all of his marvelous genius as a criminal investigator appears at its best. In it are scenes that are so suggestive of the Spanish Inquisition that one is appalled by the sinister ingenuity of the famous criminal who was responsible for them. This criminal is none other than the man known as Doctor Quartz the Second, who probably was the most dangerous and most desperate foe with whom Nick Carter ever had to deal. The story is entitled "Doctor Quartz II. at Bay; or, Nick Carter's Conflict with Iron Nerve."

A GENTLE REMINDER.

Diseases of the mind manifest themselves in strange ways, as those who have ever had anything to do with institutions for the care of the insane can testify. Some of the crazy folk are apparently quite rational at times, evidencing their unfortunate condition in neither looks nor manner.

Not long ago, a kind-hearted business man went to an asylum to see about a contract he had for furnishing some supplies. While waiting for the superintendent he roamed about the grounds, where he was suddenly accosted by one of the inmates, who told him a plausible story about being kept there by designing relatives who wished to obtain possession of his estate. The fellow was so intelligent-looking, and talked so rationally, that the visitor be-

came very much interested, and promised to see that the case was investigated and that justice was done.

Together they walked to the barred gate which separated the inclosure from the rest of the grounds, shook hands, and then the visitor turned to go out. Immediately he received a tremendous kick from behind, which took him off his feet and precipitated him in the mud.

Picking himself up, he turned to see the man whom he had intended to befriend peering at him through the gate, which a keeper had made haste to close.

"What's that for?" the visitor demanded indignantly.

"That," said the lunatic, with a silly grin—"that's lest you forget."

The Case of the Tan Glove.

By SCOTT CAMPBELL.

(A Two-part Story—Part I.)

CHAPTER I.

A COUNTERFEIT STONE.

"No, no, Jimmie, you can't keep a good man down," smiled Mr. Felix Boyd. "It's utterly impossible. You may get him down, mind you, and by fixing a cast-iron grip upon him you may, perhaps, keep him down for a time. But the instant you loose your hold, take my word for it, Jimmie, he'll bob up serenely from under your arm, or betwixt your legs, or from some utterly unexpected quarter, and have at you again. No, no, Jimmie, you can't keep a good man down."

The central-office man smiled complacently over his Blue Points, in the consumption of which he was too diligently absorbed to reply, and Felix Boyd presently added, in ruminating mood:

"So it is with the Big Finger, Jimmie. We've had him down half a score of times in the past year, or as good as down; and in each and every case, just before its culmination, just before our final blow was dealt, we'd have wagered our very lives against his escape."

"So we would, Felix," admitted Coleman, with a dubious nod.

"Yet in each and every case, Jimmie, he had slipped like an eel through our fingers," continued Boyd. "Owing to no fault of ours, mind you, no lack of precaution or shrewdness on our part; but merely because Satan, so it seems to me, often derives infinite satisfaction from serving his own at such critical moments."

"Very likely," laughed Coleman. "That's surely a philosophical way of looking at it."

"I think so, Jimmie."

"He certainly is a good man, this Big Finger, or he never could have balked and baffled you as he has done. Yes, he's a good man—in his infernally bad line!"

"And, as I said in the beginning, Jimmie, you can't keep a good man down," added Boyd, a bit grimly. "Take my word for it, the cover will slip again before we fairly know it, and like an ugly jack-in-the-box the Big Finger will again bob up, to give us renewed anxiety and additional trouble."

"Think so, Felix?"

"I do, indeed, Jimmie," nodded Boyd. "Idleness is as alien to that evil genius as beneficence is to a hog. We certainly shall hear from him again."

"Yet a full month has passed since that Sing Sing affair, resulting from the Convict Code."

"A month is but little in the life of a man."

"That's true enough, Felix. Yet we succeeded in landing every man of his gang—save him alone."

"Humph! He soon will organize another."

"Do you believe it?"

"It's as sure as death and taxes, Jimmie. A month, did you say? Yes, so it is. Two weeks in Bellevue, nursing a brace of broken ribs; and two weeks recuperating in the Adirondacks. I marvel that the Big Finger did not seize the opportunity presented by my absence, to develop and execute one of his infernally crafty, and—hello! break off for a moment, Jimmie! I've an idea that yonder men are talking of me."

And Felix Boyd bent a furtive glance in the direction of two young men, who were seated at lunch in the main room of the café.

The scene was a popular downtown restaurant, within a few blocks of the busy section of New York included below the dead line, the territory specially assigned to Detective Coleman, of the central office, and the field of most of Felix Boyd's remarkable exploits.

It was, as Coleman had said, just a month since that great police raid designed and directed by Boyd, which had resulted in the wholesale capture of the accomplished gang of crooks dominated by the notorious Big Finger, whose criminal operations below the dead line long had been a menace to every great financial institution there located.

As previously related, the escape of this obscure master criminal had been entirely accidental, a mishap which had cost Felix Boyd not only his chief prisoner, but also two broken ribs and other less serious injuries.

The couple referred to by Boyd, as above noted, appeared to be discussing some object which one of them had produced from a small wad of white cotton, taken from his fob pocket, and which had led his companion to glance occasionally in Boyd's direction. Returning it after a brief examination, he remarked, with a smile:

"It looks all right, Gerry. In my opinion the diamond is a valuable one."

Gerry replaced the glittering gem in the wad of cotton, then jammed it back into his pocket.

"Glad to hear you say so, Delmore," he rejoined.

"As a matter of fact, however, my opinion is valueless, for I am not a judge of precious stones," added Delmore, who was a reputable Wall Street broker of the younger set. "But there's a very easy way of getting at the truth."

"How so?"

"Submit the stone to Mr. Felix Boyd. He very quickly will pass upon it for you, and his judgment is infallible."

"Mr. Felix Boyd?"

"Don't you know him?"

"I can't say that I do."

Delmore's brows arched perceptibly.

"Humph! Is that so?" he murmured surprisedly. "I thought everybody knew Felix Boyd."

"I have been abroad for three years," remarked Gerry, with apologetic humility. "What about this man—Mr. Felix Boyd?"

Delmore dipped his fingers into the cut-glass bowl the waiter had placed before him, then deliberately dried them with his napkin.

"Well, Gerry," he presently rejoined, "one might say

a good deal about Felix Boyd, and then leave much unsaid. There are few, indeed, who could tell it all; for Boyd, and his secret relations with some of the financial kings of Wall Street, are mysteries yet to be unveiled. If you have finished your lunch, Gerry, I will introduce you to him. He sits at the single table in the alcove yonder, with Detective Coleman, of the central office."

"I'll go with you at once," said Gerry.

"They are coming this way, Felix," said Coleman, as the two men approached.

"So I see, Jimmie."

"Know them?"

"One only—young Delmore. His father is on my list of clients."

Boyd did not so much as glance up when the two men drew near, yet Delmore at once said familiarly:

"How are you, Mr. Boyd? I hope we don't intrude. I wish to introduce a friend of mine, Mr. Talbot Gerry. He has just returned from a three-year jaunt abroad, and I wish you to know him."

Boyd's drooping lids were raised with indolent interest, yet his gaze lingered oddly for a moment upon Gerry's face. He laid aside his napkin, with lips relaxing to a smile, and extended his hand.

"Pleased to know you, Mr. Gerry," said he. "I saw you in Algiers two years ago last Thursday."

Gerry started slightly, then laughed.

"Well, really, Mr. Boyd!" he exclaimed. "That's curious. I confess I was in Algiers about that time."

"At precisely that time, Mr. Gerry," smiled Boyd. "I was there seeking an antique Moorish scimitar, which I wished to add to my collection. I observed you only by chance."

"Well, well, you must have an excellent memory, Mr. Boyd, to have recalled the date so readily."

"Tolerably good, yes. What's the news, Delmore?"

And Felix Boyd bowed and smiled to the one, turned conventionally to the other, and then relapsed into his former indifference much as if the episode had ended.

"Nothing new, Boyd," replied Delmore. "By the way, Gerry, let's see that stone. We'll ask Mr. Boyd's opinion of it."

"Delighted, I'm sure," cried Gerry, hastening to produce the wad of cotton.

"Have a look at this, Mr. Boyd, will you? You are said to be a judge of such things, and we'd like to know what you make of it. I call it a diamond, and a very good one."

Felix Boyd accepted the proffered gem, and studied it for several moments in the palm of his hand. Presently he looked up and said:

"Where did you get this stone, Mr. Gerry?"

Gerry colored deeply, then covered his momentary embarrassment with a laugh.

"Well, to tell the truth, Mr. Boyd, I loaned an acquaintance forty dollars last night, and accepted that stone as collateral."

"He was a bit hard up, eh?" smiled Boyd, with a sharper glint in his lifted eyes.

"So it appeared."

"A friend of yours?"

"Well—no—not exactly," faltered Gerry. "Merely an acquaintance."

"Been long acquainted with him?"

Gerry laughed again, rather half-heartedly.

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Boyd, I never saw him until last evening," said he. "I ran across him while doing the town in a rather rakish fashion, and we traveled a bit in company. Incidentally he complained of being temporarily strapped, and I made him the loan mentioned."

"Naturally you learned his name?"

"The name he gave me, in return for my card, was Peterson. Yet I cannot say it was reliable, nor where he now may be found."

"That is very much to be regretted," said Boyd, with curious intonation.

"Why so, sir? Is there any doubt about the stone?"

Boyd rolled the glittering bauble across the damask table toward his questioner.

"The stone is a production of art, Mr. Gerry, not of nature," said he, with quiet significance. "It is one of the best artificial diamonds that I ever saw."

"Artificial!"

"Precisely. Yet it is so good that it might deceive even a practiced eye. As I remarked, Mr. Gerry, it is much to be regretted that you cannot locate your friend of last evening. Should you again encounter him, I would suggest that you have him detained by the police."

"I'll do that, at least!" exclaimed Gerry, quite red and heated. "Come, Delmore, I feel the need of a stimulant. Will you join us, Mr. Boyd?"

"I think not now, thank you," said Boyd, smiling. "Some other time, if agreeable to you."

"Charmed at any time, I assure you."

Boyd gazed after the two men as they left the room. Only his eyes betrayed his quickened interest. They had taken on a gleam like that reflected from a polished blade in the moonlight. Presently he drew out a leather notebook, and with a pencil jotted down the name of Mr. Talbot Gerry.

"What do you make of that, Felix?" inquired Coleman curiously.

Boyd shook his head significantly.

"It is another of those paste diamonds, Jimmie, of which I told you," he replied. "This is the second I have seen, yet I plainly could have learned no more than before concerning the maker. He must be found—located—annihilated! His art is dangerous. His skill is a menace. Such imitations threaten the financial safety of every jewelry dealer in the country, if not in the world. I again must warn my clients in that line of the existence of these remarkable counterfeits. Are you through, Jimmie? Come, then. I'll attend to it this very day."

Coleman had merely nodded in response to the question, and the two men left the restaurant in company. As they emerged to the sunlit street, thronged at that hour with hurrying people, Boyd briefly paused, and asked:

"Where now, Jimmie?"

"I'm going up to headquarters for a spell," replied Coleman. "I have a report to turn in, and two letters to write."

"Shall I see you later?"

"I'll drop into your office about five."

"So long, then."

The central-office man bowed and departed.

Boyd lingered for several moments in the restaurant doorway, with his brows knit in thought. He had in mind the artificial gem he had just seen, a most remarkable

imitation of a genuine diamond, and no man was quicker to discern the alarming possibilities such counterfeits afforded.

Boyd had on his list of clients several wealthy diamond importers and brokers of Maiden Lane, as well as two large retail jewelry houses; and of them, too, he was thinking, and of the warning with which he might serve them.

Thus coming events at times cast their shadows before. For as Boyd presently turned to depart, he suddenly observed his office boy, Terence Gowan, bolting across the street toward him.

"Gosh! I'm just in the nick of time," gasped Terry, flushed and well-nigh breathless. "You're wanted at once, Mr. Boyd."

Boyd's clean-cut, attractive face changed like a flash, instantly taking on that flinty, determined look which invariably characterized him when engaged by any professional emergency.

"By whom?" he curtly demanded, with eyes dilating.

"Dabney & Co., sir, Maiden Lane," cried Terry, with amazing volubility. "They sent a messenger to your office, and I rushed here to——"

"Stop a bit! Do you know what has happened at Dabney's?"

"Not sure, sir. A big swipe of diamonds, I think the messenger said. He waited only a moment——"

"Which is longer than I should wait!" interrupted Boyd, with startling vehemence, when the diamonds were mentioned. "Here, you, cabby, this way! I may want you, Terry, so in with you. Don't spare your horseflesh, cabby. A dollar a minute—that's your fee! To Dabney & Co., jewelers, Maiden Lane, at the top of your speed!"

Then a bang of the closed door—and a vehicle tearing through the crowded street.

Passing people stared and wondered.

CHAPTER II.

SEEKING A TRAIL.

A dollar a minute was not an extravagant fee for Felix Boyd to have offered his cabman, for scarce three minutes had passed when the carriage drew down at the curbing, fronting the great retail jewelry store of Messrs. Dabney & Co., in those days one of the noteworthy attractions of Maiden Lane.

"Wait here, cabby," commanded Boyd, as he sprang out upon the sidewalk. "You, Terry, follow me in, as I may want you. Display no interest in my doings, however."

"Not I, sir!" rejoined the lad. "Trust me for that."

Boyd entered like an ordinary customer, yet strode quite briskly down one of the broad aisles between the splendid counters, with only cursory glances at the magnificent display of merchandise on every side.

Yet before Boyd had passed half through the long aisle, he was hurriedly approached by an elderly, distinguished-looking man, obviously much agitated, who whispered rapidly as he grasped Boyd's arm:

"This way, quick! Thank Heaven you're here! I dispatched a messenger for you at once. We have been swindled——"

"Hush! Be prudent!" growled Boyd, with a reprehensive glance at the man. "Whatever the occasion of your agitation, Mr. Dabney, it cannot warrant the slightest betrayal of our secret business relations. Compose yourself at once."

In order to dispel the misgivings of any observer, for the popular store was well filled with customers, at that hour, Boyd fell to laughing softly before the last was said; and the man addressed, who was the head and front of the famous firm, at once took the cue so quietly given him.

"Ah, true!" he softly exclaimed, with an attempt to force a smile to his pale face. "I will be more discreet, Mr. Boyd."

"What is the trouble? Quietly."

"I have just been robbed of a dozen valuable diamond rings—swindled in a most absurd manner."

"How, and by whom?"

"By a woman who pretended she wished to make a purchase. She was shown a tray of very valuable rings, many of which she briefly examined. While doing so she managed to steal twelve of the rings, and substitute in their places twelve almost perfect duplicates as regards settings. The stones the substitutes contain, however, while of nearly the same size as those stolen, are imitations only, of a most remarkable character."

"Ha! So I'm too late!" Boyd ejaculated. "I came here to warn you of these imitations. I have done so once before, Mr. Dabney, as you may remember."

"True—that is true. I should have been more guarded. Yet my clerks are experienced, and are thoroughly trustworthy. I could not have believed such a theft possible."

"There are some very clever knaves at work about here nowadays, Mr. Dabney," said Boyd pointedly. "These remarkable imitations——"

"Oh, they completely deceived Mr. Gibson, my clerk, and the woman's dexterity in substituting the bogus rings must have been extraordinary," groaned Dabney, under his breath. "I went to question Gibson soon after the woman departed, wondering if she had made a purchase, and I then discovered the fraud."

"How long ago?"

"Barely half an hour."

"What is the value of the stolen goods?"

"More than three thousand dollars."

"I will talk with Gibson and see what may be done," said Boyd. "Wait one moment, Mr. Dabney."

"Well?"

"Allow me to do all of the talking with Gibson, and present me to him, and remark upon the facts, entirely as if your disclosures of the loss were merely incidental. I do not wish Gibson to infer that I am in your service. Leave me to get at the facts, in so far as he can impart them. I can do so better than you."

Dabney slightly inclined his gray head, and yielded to Boyd's restraining hand as the two approached a counter somewhat removed. A middle-aged man of frank countenance stood behind it, who anxiously regarded his employer as the two men drew near. Half an eye convinced Felix Boyd, who was a keen physiognomist, that the clerk was honest.

"Let me see that tray of rings again, Gibson," said Mr. Dabney, halting with Boyd at the counter. "This gentleman is an expert, and I wish to submit them to him. I have told him of the swindle by which I fear we have been victimized."

Gibson hastened to bring the desired tray from a vault in the wall, and with agitated hands placed it upon the broad glass show case.

"Alas! I can never forgive myself," he groaned, with a hopeless look at Boyd's firm, inscrutable face.

From their dark background of plush, each ring occupying a tiny slot in the tray, which was invariably kept filled to prevent any undetected theft by an examiner of them, half a hundred costly solitaires gleamed and blazed with dazzling radiance, as if with a light and life all their own.

Boyd bowed above the tray, and for several moments silently studied its contents. Then, with the tip of his pencil, one after the other he raised twelve of the rings from the slots, and dropped them upon a square piece of velvet on the show case.

"Victimized—yes, Mr. Dabney, there is no doubt of it," said he, glancing up. "Just a dozen, sir, you said. I do not much wonder that your clerk did not detect the substituted imitations; they are extraordinarily good. By the way, Mr. Gibson, are there any previous circumstances bearing upon the prospective sale which led you to show this tray of rings to the woman who, I understand, has stolen some of them?"

"You may state any facts to this gentleman, Gibson," remarked Mr. Dabney.

The clerk hastened to reply.

"I never saw the woman before to-day," said he. "About a week ago, however, a young man called and examined these rings, saying that he intended to buy one. He did not make a selection that day, but said he would call again in the course of a week and do so."

"Well?"

"He called this morning, sir, about twelve o'clock, and I again showed him the rings. Finally he selected one, asking me to remember it, and said that he wished his wife to call and see it before he made the purchase. He said that she would call about two o'clock to-day, and I gave him one of my cards."

"Go on, Mr. Gibson."

"Just before two o'clock a young lady approached the counter here and presented the same card, requesting me to show her the rings at which her husband had been looking. Naturally, sir, I had no suspicion, and readily complied. She examined the tray of rings, and we discussed them together, possibly occupying a quarter hour; yet not for a moment did I lose sight of the tray, or her. She finally decided that her husband had made a desirable selection, and said she would at once send him a note, advising him to call and get the ring on his way home to-day, lest it should be sold to another. I provided her with paper and pencil, and she wrote the note, and immediately departed. Alas! sir, we since have discovered——"

"One moment, Mr. Gibson," Boyd interposed, now that he had got most of the man's story. "The method adopted by the swindlers is very obvious. The young man first called to study the tray of rings, that counterfeits might be made with which to deceive you. His visit this morning was calculated only to pave the way for his wife, thus tending in a measure to relax your vigilance. She evidently is a woman of superior nerve and exceeding dexterity. Under your very eyes she must have palmed the genuine rings, and disposed of them on her person, substituting only the counterfeits."

"It appears so," groaned Gibson, wringing his hands. "I could not have believed it possible, however."

"Kindly answer a few questions for me, Mr. Gibson. First describe the young man."

"He appeared to be about twenty-five, of medium height and build. He was rather boyish-looking, as I recall him, wearing neither beard nor mustache. I should say that his complexion was light, his eyes blue, and his voice somewhat effeminate."

"How about the woman, Mr. Gibson?"

"She, too, was young, sir, and very pretty. She was fashionably dressed, and I naturally supposed her to be a young lady of wealth. She was rather above medium size, I should say, with fascinating eyes and a most alluring smile. I think of no special feature by which she could be identified, nor any——"

"One moment, please. How long since she departed?"

"Possibly half an hour."

"Were there any names mentioned?"

"None, sir."

"Perhaps you supposed the two parties to be a recently married couple."

"That was precisely my impression, sir."

"Quite in order, I'm sure," nodded Boyd. "Really, Mr. Dabney, the case seems to present no very encouraging features."

"None at all that I can see," was the dubious rejoinder. "The scoundrels certainly have gotten well away with the goods."

"If you had but a single clew to offer the——"

"Oh, stay! that glove!" cried Mr. Dabney abruptly. "Possibly that will suggest something to Mr. Boyd."

"Ah, what is this?" cried Boyd, with a second warning glance at the impulsive speaker.

Gibson had produced from behind the counter a fashionable tan glove, lady's size, slightly worn and soiled. As he laid it upon the show case in front of Boyd, he quickly rejoined:

"It was dropped by the woman, sir, while she was writing the note mentioned. I did not discover it until she had gone, then saw it lying near the lacquer table yonder."

"You are sure that it was hers?" inquired Boyd.

"Absolutely! She had both gloves in her hand while examining the tray of rings."

"Ah, very likely!" growled Boyd pointedly. "Possibly some of the purloined rings found their way into the other glove. A pity, too, it had not been this one. It bears no mark by which to track her. Medium size, however, and of French make. You say she sat at yonder table while writing the note?"

And Boyd glanced again at a small, highly polished table which stood in the aisle, with one of the counter chairs still beside it.

"Yes, sir," replied Gibson. "She occupied that chair. I provided her with a single sheet of paper which I happened to have here, and loaned her my pencil. She said she did not require any envelope, as she would send the note to her husband's office by her footman."

Boyd did not appear to have heard the last. Several of the store clerks had gathered in a group near by, and those standing nearest to him saw, or thought they saw, one swift, intensified gleam, as sharp as an electric flash, leap up from the depths of his frowning gray eyes.

It was gone in an instant, however, and Boyd then

dropped into the chair the thief had occupied, and proceeded to make a closer inspection of her tan glove—the one and only tangible clew to the mysterious pair of swindlers.

"Footman, eh?" he presently growled, plainly indicating that he had heard, despite appearances. "She came in a carriage, then?"

"So I inferred," replied Gibson.

"You did not see the vehicle?"

"I did not, sir. Wishing to replace the tray of rings in the vault as soon as possible, I did not accompany her to the door."

There was a brief period of silence, the more strained because of the obvious mental absorption of the man in the chair. Felix Boyd sat tipping the small, polished table to and fro, with his brows knit, his lips drawn, and his gaze vacantly fixed upon the dainty bit of furniture. Through one of the broad plate-glass windows near by, the glare of light fell upon its polished surface, and accentuated with its reflection Boyd's strangely set and forceful face.

Presently he stared abruptly and glanced at his watch, finding it to be nearly half past two.

"Suppose you bring those twelve bogus rings into your private office, Mr. Dabney," said he carelessly, as he arose. "An examination under a lense may reveal something."

"Possibly," admitted Dabney; yet for his life he could not have told what advantage was thus to be derived. "You may put them in a small box for me, Mr. Gibson."

"I will take along this tan glove, also," remarked Boyd, sauntering away in advance.

As he approached the end of one of the counters, however, at which Terry Gowan was staring idly into a show case, Boyd's indifference suddenly took wings. His hand closed upon the lad's arm with a grip that betrayed his suppressed energy, and he bowed to whisper rapidly:

"Find the store telephone, Terry! Get Coleman at the central office! Have him meet me at the Hotel Tripoli, at three o'clock sharp! Three sharp, mind you! Hotel Tripoli!"

"I'm wise, sir!" the lad quickly nodded, and immediately glided away.

As Boyd stepped aside for Dabney to precede him into the latter's private office, which was at the rear of the store, he took from the jeweler's hand the small pasteboard box containing the dozen bogus rings.

"I'll keep these for a spell, Mr. Dabney," said he, with curious indifference. "By the way, while I think of it, what is the price of the lacquer table out yonder, the one at which I was seated?"

"Forty dollars," cried Dabney, perplexed and irritated. "That's a strange question to ask at such a time as this. Is your interest in that infernal little table more pronounced than in the service you are employed to render me? If it is, Mr. Felix Boyd——"

"Oh, stow all that!" Boyd curtly interrupted. "I'll take the table at the price quoted. Set it aside for me without fail. I shall call here again before six, Mr. Dabney, and then will report on this case."

"But——"

"There are no buts, sir, when I declare myself," growled Boyd, thrusting the glove and box of rings into his pocket. "It now is half past two. At three I have an important engagement. Expect me again within the interval mentioned. Meantime—not a word!"

"Why—certainly—not a word!" gasped Dabney, with an amazed stare.

For Mr. Felix Boyd already had departed.

TO BE CONCLUDED.

THE PLOT OF THE "PROFESSOR."

By W. B. M. FERGUSON.

The district attorney took off his pince-nez, wiped them absently with his napkin, and, with a slow smile, pushed the evening paper across the table to the young, aggressive-looking man with the steel-gray eyes.

"I see they haven't caught your friend the 'professor' yet," he observed quietly.

"I waive ownership. Your interests were vested in the gentleman quite as much as mine," returned his vis-à-vis dryly.

"Your modesty is too much of a virtue, Baird. As prosecuting attorney you must necessarily arouse a greater affection in the hearts of lawbreakers than I, who seldom come in direct contact with them. My affection is from the mass; yours from the unit. Now that the 'professor' has broken prison, you had better forestall any token of esteem he might endeavor to bestow upon you."

Baird thoughtfully rubbed a big chin with a bigger hand.

"If I paid attention to all the threats of every criminal I have convicted, I would have been bankrupt long ago," he said slowly. "They spit venom, but a term in prison draws their fangs. They never bite. Besides, I think they understand there is no personality in my dealings with them. I am merely the pawn of the government. Like you—the moving spirit."

"Always?" said the district attorney quietly. "Are you always a mere governmental automaton? I rather thought there was an element of personality in your tenacious, invincible prosecution that resulted in the 'professor' ascending the river for twenty years plus his unfinished sentence."

Baird with hard eyes watched the smoke from his cigarette as it streaked in a sinuous blue streamer down the café dining room.

"You are right," he admitted slowly. "That was the hackneyed exception that proves the rule. There was personality in that case. If I had had my way, instead of twenty years 'hard,' the professor would have gone to the chair."

"For manslaughter? Impossible. You got him the limit as it was. But for you it would have been ten years. Viewed from a professional standpoint I may say your prosecution was a masterpiece—and it earned you the hatred of our most brilliant criminal."

Baird's eyes narrowed disagreeably.

"It would disgrace an honest man to have anything but his hatred. Though he has had such a successful criminal career, this manslaughter case gave me the first opportunity—the opportunity I thirsted after—of facing him in the dock. I waited five years for it. The interest piled high in the interim."

The district attorney glanced curiously at the sharp, hard face of his lieutenant.

"Baird," he said hesitatingly, "I have no desire to inquire into your private affairs, but don't you think this

personal animosity of yours has led you—and me—into, perhaps, committing an injustice?"

"How?" said Baird quietly.

"Well, you know I wasn't set on forcing to the limit the prosecution of the 'professor.' I listened to your persuasions. I gave you practically free rein in the matter. I know his record was against him, but, despite it, I could not help feeling that for the nonce he was innocent of that charge—the shooting of his tool, Longman. I know the evidence was strong, especially that of the stool pigeon, Whitman. But it seems to me that the 'professor' is too clever and diabolical a criminal to choose a pistol as a stepping-stone to immortality. His past record shows that he plays with his victim and ultimately gives him a horribly ingenious death. You remember the case, five years ago, of Captain Smith, of the secret service—the time he caught the 'professor' for that old A—— Bank robbery of thirty years ago?"

Baird nodded understandingly.

"That was a case," he said reflectively. "After coming through so much it was hard on Captain Smith that his man broke prison before a year of his sentence was served."

"Precisely what he has done with us now," said the district attorney, tapping the paper. "That woman they call the 'Queen of Sheba' must be a female Mephistopheles. She engineered both escapes, they say. They are a mighty clever pair, and as dangerous as a brace of cornered rattlesnakes."

"Worse," said Baird laconically. "A rattler gives warning before it strikes; the 'professor' and the 'Queen of Sheba' after. You spoke a moment ago about our—or, rather, my—possibly having done this 'professor' an injustice. I don't put him on reading terms with the word 'justice.' If he was innocent of that manslaughter charge—which I sincerely think he was—he is guilty of a thousand worse. Anyway, he would have had to serve out that unfinished A—— Bank sentence. When he is caught again, he will serve out two unfinished sentences, and if it is my luck to have a hand in the prosecution, I'll crush him;" and Baird clenched his big hand until the knuckles showed white and drawn.

"I am afraid you won't have the opportunity," said the district attorney dryly. "They are by far the cleverest scoundrels in the country. With their marvelous adaptability for disguise, they are practically impregnable. You must remember that it was owing entirely to chance that the 'professor' was caught by Captain Smith, and also in this manslaughter case. The woman has never been caught. I sincerely trust they do not come within my jurisdiction again. They are poor pay."

"They will be rounded up yet," said Baird harshly. "It is only a case of giving them enough rope. It hasn't been my luck to run across the woman, but if I ever do——" The unfinished sentence was the epitome of grim vengeance.

"So she, too, is down on your personal-animosity books?" said the district attorney.

Baird nodded.

"I don't know whether you care to hear the rattle of the family skeleton, but I owe it to you and myself to explain the justice of my animosity. It starts from the time of the A—— Bank robbery, thirty years ago. You remember it was a two-million-dollar theft? You are familiar with the details, so I will not go into them. Suffice, the cashier of the bank commited suicide one year after the robbery. Well, I learned from Captain Smith that the 'professor' boasted to him how the woman, the 'Queen of Sheba,' got the cashier to fall in love with her and rob the bank. Then the 'professor,' in turn, robbed him, and, under threat of exposure and death, compelled him to resume his position in the bank. You remember the cashier was unsuspected, the robbery being planned to represent the work of professionals."

"Yes," said the district attorney, "I remember. The whole case was rehashed five years ago, when the 'professor' was convicted."

"Well," said Baird slowly, "you also may remember that the name of that cashier was Baird."

The district attorney's eyes flickered. Baird was looking grimly at his cigarette.

"Yes," he continued quietly; "that cashier—that scapegoat—happened also to be my father. He sinned—and he paid bitterly for it. My mother paid for it; I paid for it; if I live I will see that the real culprits pay for it. So you see, I rather think there was a little personal animosity in my last prosecution."

There was silence. Then the district attorney put his hand across the table. His grip was a tonic.

"Does the 'professor' know you are the son of the man he ruined and practically murdered?" he asked gently, after a minute's meditation.

Baird shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"It is enough that I know," he said bitterly.

* * * * * * *

In a sour-smelling back room of a dingy saloon in the vicinity of Five Points, the "hang-out" of the "yakey yakes" and similar fauna of the lower East Side, two men were seated over a sloppy table and a flask of "Star" brandy. The atmosphere was thick with cheap cigarette smoke and unclean verbiage. Any night in the week one could see the same picture of the two men, the brandy and the smoke, and hear the verbiage.

The men were generally alone. Stool pigeons are ostracized by the criminal East Side—killed, when their information to the police results in a conviction and their treachery is proven.

The ethics of Cherry Hill and Five Points is: gang against gang, and all against the law. And if you get "fixed," keep it to yourself until you can square the "fixer." Recognized stool pigeons are tolerated so long as they inform on those out of their district or, sometimes, on the rival gang of whatever particular gang they themselves belong to. Any promiscuous informing quickly results in an autopsy.

The thickset man with the ox-blood shirt and tight-hipped trousers lay back in his chair and elaborately probed his teeth with a frayed toothpick.

"Scared?" he reiterated contemptuously. "Scared of wot?"

His ferret-eyed companion, with the inquisitive nose and brittle finger nails, eyed the dirty ceiling through the bottom of his glass.

"Why, dis guy—dis 'perfessor.' I t'ought he was goin' to square youse for squealin' th' time he fixed his pal, Longman. Dey say he's a guy wot keeps his word. He's broke jail, an' I'd beat it for cover if I was youse."

"Aw, beat it nothin'," said the ox-blood shirt. "I kin hold me own. I got th' law back of me in dis deal, see?"

"Sure," snuffled his companion sarcastically. "I knows dis here law. Dey let youse take all th' risks by gittin' evidence, an' den when de guy has served his bit an'

comes lookin' for youse wit' a gun, an' shoots youse full of buttonholes——"

"Aw, croak," sneered the other. "Don't we git paid for doin' our spiel? Besides, dis ain't no ordinary game. I'm right in wit' th' prosecutin' attorney."

"He'll t'row you down."

"T'row nuttin'. Youse ain't so wise as you think, Mugsey. Me an' him are pals in this. He can't t'row me down. I got him hunched."

The ferret eyes of the man addressed as Mugsey narrowed.

"I always said youse was a clever mut, Jim," he said softly. "I always said youse was too good to travel wit' this push, didn't I?"

The other swallowed his brandy at a gulp. His eyes were bright with strong drink and egoism.

"I didn't do dirty work for the 'professor' not to get wise. But he done me dirt, an' so I got hunk by swearin' I heard him say he was goin' to fix his pal, Longman, see? I got hunk an' made a pile of money on th' one deal."

The ferret eyes were covetous.

"You're one of th' slickest guys I ever seen," he said, with soft admiration.

"Slicker'n youse think," and the ox-blood shirt wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and then wiped the hand on his trousers. He took a long drag at his cigarette and luxuriously blew the inhale into his companion's face.

The ferret-eyed man blinked and absently filled the glasses.

"You always was a clever mut, Jim," he reiterated, seemingly unable to comprehend his friend's vast intellectual capacity.

"Sure, sure," agreed Jim, regarding the ceiling with bleared eye, a trickle of brandy threading its way down his scarred chin. "I suppose you think this guy, the 'professor,' really did do for Longman, eh?"

"Youse swore he did," returned his companion deprecatingly.

Jim brought his big hand down on the table with a wavering crash. "Sure, every one t'ought so except me an' the 'professor'—an' th' prosecutin' attorney. See, it was dis way. Me an' th' prosecutin' attorney was sore on th' 'professor.' The old man had broke jail an' was hiding here in Noo York. I was in wit' him then. I was waitin' my chance to get hunk. It come. The woman, the old man, and his pal, Longman, were livin' together. They was disguised and tootin' along as high rollers. Longman was a nutty guy, always repentin' of his sins, an' so one day he gets religion, or somethin', an' he ups an' shoots himself t'rough th' head, see? I was wise that th' prosecutin' attorney was sore on th' 'professor.' It's none of your business why. If th' 'professor' was caught he would only have to serve out his bit. But if I could prove murder against him, it would be th' chair for his. So I goes to th' prosecutin' attorney, gives away th' old man's joint, an' then for so many plunks I takes th' stand an' swears I heard th' 'professor' say he was goin' to do for his pal, Longman, see? But de jury was a lot of stiffs, an' th' old man only went up for manslaughter an' th' bit he hadn't served."

"Chee!" murmured ferret eyes awedly. "To think that th' prosecutin' gent was your pal in doin' th' old man up! Chee, to think th' old man broke jail an' youse had all your work for nuttin'!"

"I got mé money, didn't I?" growled ox-blood shirt. "Anyway, I knows where th' old man's hidin'. Right here in Noo York. I'm goin' to blow on him to me pal. That'll be some more for mine."

"Chee!" said ferret eyes enviously. "How do youse get so wise? There ain't a cop in th' States knows where he is."

"Aw, cops!" said Jim scathingly. "A bum raft of stuffed cherubs. They couldn't find an elephant if it was sleepin' on their stomachs. I knows all th' old man's joints. He's pretty foxy at changin' his mug, but he can't fool me. To-day I found where he's hidin'—in a big, old house at a Hundred an' Forty-fift' Street an' Broadway. Him an' th' woman are lyin' low. Of course they're disguised, but you can't fool Jim Whitman. No, not a little bit;" and he drained the glass his companion had been endeavoring to keep filled.

"This 'perfessor' must have money," mused ferret eyes.

"Sure," agreed the second stool pigeon. "I someways wish he hadn't done me dirt, for I made big money wit' him. But youse can't use Jim Whitman for a floor cloth more'n onct."

"You seem to be makin' pretty good out of him as it is," said ferret eyes, with covetous sarcasm.

Both men relapsed into silence. Ferret eyes was thoughtful, ox-blood shirt moody. Then the lights in the front room disappeared for the night.

* * * * * * *

The prosecuting attorney swung round in his revolving chair and faced the farce in bright red with the flagrantly youthful complexion.

"So you are the lady who has persisted in interviewing me?" he said sharply. He looked at his watch. "I can give you five minutes. What can I do for you, madam?"

The woman waved a deprecating hand.

"There, none of your stump speeches. You don't know who I am. I'm Jim Whitman's wife."

"I am honored, madam," said Baird, unmoved.

"You don't look it," said the woman coolly, taking a seat. "I thought I would drop in and talk business with you. I know all about your plans to catch the 'professor' to-night. Jim is stool pigeon for you, ain't he? Yes, and you were all going up to the house to-night to arrest the 'professor.' Of course you was. Well, what will it be worth to me if I acquaint you with a little game that's going on in the inside, eh?"

"Madam, this office doesn't bribe," said Baird coldly.

"Don't, eh? Well, ain't that a shame? Seems as if you can have men stool pigeons all right enough. So you won't talk business? Not it; I told you you were going to walk into a trap to-night, eh?"

Baird's hands clenched. The woman watched him narrowly.

"You're a gentleman, Mr. Baird. I know you'll treat us white, and I don't want to see murder done. I'll tell you that Jim has turned on you—sold you out to the 'professor,' his old employer. He got all he could out of you, and now he's working in again with the old man. It's Jim's way. The 'professor' forgave Jim's treachery to him, the price being Jim's treachery to you. And, of course, Jim will get a big price for it. The old man hates you. You'll go to your death to-night, Mr. Baird, if you follow out the plans you agreed on with Jim."

"Indeed!" said Baird harshly. "And what proof have

I that you are telling the truth? And how did you know all this?"

"I've got ears, haven't I? I have an apartment round on Forty-sixth Street, and the whole thing was planned there. The 'professor' was down last night. Seems he can go anywhere with his disguises. Well, I didn't want Jim to have anything to do with the old man; he's dangerous. But Jim did. Seems the 'professor' hypnotizes him or something. I fell out with Jim. As for proof, you'll see that Jim won't show up here to-day as agreed, but at four o'clock you'll get a wire from him saying that the 'professor' has skipped out to Chicago, and that he, Jim, has broken his leg, or some game like that. He'll ask you to come and see him to-night at the Forty-sixth Street flat, and he'll put you wise where the 'professor' intends hiding. Of course, not expecting anything, you'll come along. Then the 'professor' will——" The woman drew her hand across her throat suggestively.

"Why do you come and inform against your husband?" asked Baird quietly.

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

"I hate the 'professor.' He has always got Jim in trouble. It's the only way I can stop Jim's making a fool of himself. He don't seem to realize that he's being made a party to a murder. But Jim's gone on money. I thought if I could get out of you what he expects to get out of the 'professor,' why, he would be satisfied. I don't want you to hurt Jim, though."

"I must have proof of your integrity before I can take any steps in the matter," said Baird.

"All right, it's your funeral, not mine," said the woman, rising, and walking to the door.

"Just a minute," said Baird sharply. The woman turned.

"Where are Whitman and the 'professor' now?" he asked quietly.

"I'm not a mind reader. All I know is that the old man is to be at the apartment in Forty-sixth Street at nine to-night."

"And your husband?"

"He won't have an actual hand in the murder. He'll be at the uptown house all night—the 'professor's' house."

"Very good," said Baird, and his tone was incisive. "Now, if the wire you spoke of comes at four o'clock this evening, I will go in person to the uptown house and find out if you are telling the truth. If you are, I will force Whitman to accompany me downtown. Then with the proper authority and force I'll take him to the Forty-sixth Street flat, and when I get the two conspirators together, I'll arrest them both. To prevent you from giving your husband any warning, I must detain you overnight. Don't open that door! I have only to press this button and the outer office is barred against you."

The woman's hand dropped from the door handle.

"You can't detain me," she cried contemptuously. "You've no warrant—no charge."

"I beg to differ," said Baird ironically. "Anybody can have any one arrested on any charge. I have only to charge you with disorderly conduct, blackmail, anything, and you will be detained until the charge is proven—or disproven. That is all I want. A word to the chief of police, and——"

"And this is my reward for warning you?" said the woman slowly.

Baird eyed her meditatively, chin to hand.

"When I am after big game I take no chances," he said quietly. "I must detain you overnight. You will not be inconvenienced or compromised in any way. You will stop at a downtown hotel—and two detectives will keep their eyes on you."

The woman started to speak, her eyes blazing, but Baird raised his big hand.

"Will you consent quietly, or must I phone for a patrol wagon?" he asked grimly.

The woman surveyed him, calm and contemptuous. "I will go quietly," she said.

* * * * * * *

At One Hundred and Forty-fifth Street and Broadway there stands a great, old-fashioned, red brick house, rearing itself aloft like some grim veteran of the Old Guard, in the half acre of ground encompassing it. At present it is used as a quarantine station for the Hebrew Juvenile Orphan Asylum, but several years ago it was to let to any desirable, wealthy tenant who wished seclusion and old-fashioned comfort. To this day the block in which the house stands is known as "Dead Man's Corner." And the following incident baptized it:

There were three occupants of the big library on the ground floor rear of the old red house. A huge base burner in the center of the room glowed like the eye of Cyclops. A February wind howled against the long, narrow windows. A lamp accentuated the gloomy shadows on the walls. A Dresden china clock on the finely carved marble mantelpiece musically chimed the hour of eight.

Two of the men were lying side by side on the floor, bound hand and foot and viciously gagged. Both were big men. One had an ox-blood shirt and tight-hipped trousers. Over his left eye there was a huge, contused wound, on which the blood had dried black and hard. The other man had large, well-shaped hands, and an aggressive chin. His face was splotched with blood, but his steel-gray eyes snapped venomously. Those gray eyes were boring into the face of a smooth-shaven, delicately featured, gray-haired gentleman, who was smoking a cigarette and staring meditatively into the glowing bowels of the base burner. This gentleman was known to the police of two continents as the "professor."

The "professor's" abstracted gaze was drawn by the condensed glare of the steely gray eyes on the floor.

"Ah," he said courteously, "I see you have regained consciousness, Mr. Baird. I regret exceedingly having had to resort to the services of a blackjack. However, thanks to your cleverness, my usual methods had to be temporarily abandoned. If you had not detained my colleague, we could have prepared a more fitting welcome for you. I trust you will overlook my impromptu hospitality. You see, you were expected, so, as a host should, I left the hall door open; you stepped in, I stepped out, and—well, I hardly think that blood on your face improves your appearance. Does it?" he finished solicitously, his head on one side.

Baird's eyes were the incarnation of baffled venom. The "professor's" voice was soft and meditative when next he spoke.

"This fortuitous meeting of ours appears to be a very hashed-up affair, Mr. Baird. It presents many curious details. I admit I made a serious error. I underrated your ability. You are the first representative of the law to trap my estimable confrère, the 'Queen of Sheba.' Permit me—congratulations."

A flame of unholy joy flashed in Baird's eyes. His caution had been justified! By dumb luck he had fast

in the toils the most dangerous woman in the country. And what had been simply the result of a naturally suspicious nature the "professor" attributed to unusual penetration and cleverness. Well, let him think so.

"Yes," continued the "professor" moodily, "I admire your cleverness. I presume you got that wire regarding Mr. Whitman's broken leg, et cetera? And so you saw through the trap laid for you, but came, nevertheless, thinking to take me single-handed? A very unwise proceeding, Mr. Baird. You see, we had decoyed Mr. Whitman here this morning. His being my cherished guest involves that little saw concerning honor among thieves. Our old saws need sharpening. Mr. Whitman was a stool pigeon of yours, I believe. If you notice, I use the past tense, for Mr. Whitman will cease to be anything very shortly. But to resume; well, Mr. Whitman's tongue has a deplorable penchant for ceaseless activity. Last night, while under the influence of liquor, he made several admissions to a fellow stool pigeon. That stool pigeon happened to possess a commercial instinct, Ergo, he came to me. I got considerable information; he got considerable money."

Here the ox-blood shirt writhed and twisted in a paroxysm of fury.

"My old friend Mr. Whitman evinces considerable interest in his friend's commercial genius," purred the "professor." Then his face was sponged over, and a look of malevolent hatred was born.

"Mr. Baird," he said softly, "among the many admissions of Mr. Whitman he said that you were aware from the start that I was innocent of that manslaughter charge; that you know Longman committed suicide. In short, Mr. Baird, you deliberately prostituted your office for the sake of a personal revenge, and entered into a conspiracy with a common thief to commit perjury and foist a murder charge upon me. A most worthy son of a worthy father," he sneered.

The veins in Baird's hands stood out with sudden fury. He endeavored to raise his head, but it fell back. His tongue, fastening with the pent-up venom of his and his father's wrongs, was powerless to voice them.

"I knew you were the son of an old acquaintance of mine," pursued the "professor" grimly. "That was why I knew there was personal animosity in your prosecution of me. That was why I promised to kill you when an indulgent Providence afforded me the opportunity. That opportunity has come."

Baird's eyes were hard and cold. He knew that he was face to face with death. There was no shirking, no temporizing, no hope; but, true to his grim, merciless nature, he met his fate unflinchingly. After all, the world must shake hands with death some day.

The clock ticked, and the "professor" smoked in moody silence.

"A horribly cold night," he murmured conversationally. "It would help you gentlemen materially if you could take some of this weather with you to the next world."

Putting his hand into his pocket, he produced a long sheath knife, which he contemplated meditatively, head on one side. Then, removing the gleaming blade from its covering, he tested its edge with a delicate thumb.

"Sharper than a woman's tongue, my friends," he observed agreeably. "It leaves no sting behind, though;" and he balanced it calculatingly in his hand. Finally, with a sigh, he rose from his chair and stooped over the prosecuting attorney.

Baird never wavered as he beheld the cold, malignant eyes poised above him. He gritted his teeth, and waited. He wondered vaguely where the knife would strike, and what exactly would its touch be like. Would its death kiss be long and lingering, or quick and passionate? The answer was indefinitely postponed. The "professor" merely severed the cords that had bitten into Baird's face, then deftly removed his gag.

"I may suggest that it will be quite useless to make any outcry," he said. "We have no neighbors, and besides——" He fingered the knife suggestively. "Now, Mr. Baird," he added sharply, "I am going to give you a chance for your life—not because I want to, but because I must."

"Keep it," snarled Baird.

"The terms are these," continued the "professor," unmoved: "You give me your word of honor that you will not divulge the identity of my confederate, whom you have trapped. Give me forty-eight hours' start, and set my confederate at liberty to-night, giving her the same start as myself."

"No," said Baird quietly.

"You won't?"

"No!" reiterated the prosecuting attorney furiously, his face distorted with passion. "Carry out your cursed deal! I've got one of you fast in the trap at last, and she doesn't break out this side of the grave. I am not your employee; I'm the United States government's; and you couldn't bribe me with every fiber of your putrid soul!"

A vicious sneer dragged at the "professor's" mouth. "I gave you the chance for the woman's sake," he said quietly. "I am sorry now that I did. We have to pay the price of woman's love, in one form or another, and I was willing."

Suddenly another voice was heard in the room; a voice other than the "professor's" high, snarling falsetto. This one was hoarse and pleading. The "professor" turned in a flash, his knife poised; then his arm fell slowly to his side. The voice was Whitman's, one arm free, the gag removed.

Through six long hours of patient effort, unwearying endeavor, the stool pigeon had worked at his bonds. Apparently he had at last succeeded in freeing his flayed wrist from the cord that had bitten deeply into the flesh. In reality, he had accomplished more than that. Fear, hatred, desperation, fidelity to his rough code of honor, had spurred him on. Now he lay, to all appearances, a helpless victim, one hand free, it is true, but the other, together with his feet, securely pinioned. So the "professor" smiled sardonically. There was nothing to fear. What could the stool pigeon hope to accomplish—if such a desperate thought had entered his mind, fettered and cramped as he was—against an active, implacable, armed enemy?

But, known only to himself, Whitman had accomplished a good deal in those six strenuous hours—accomplished everything. The ropes appeared still to bind him—but only appeared. For the past five minutes he had been a free man, a dangerous man, lying quietly, grimly, slowly regaining circulation and flexibility. That accomplished—well, he had always been a gambler. Rather than wait for the certain death he knew would be meted out to him, he would stake all upon a single throw. He would throttle this fiend, this former employer; throttle him with his bare hands, unaided.

In imagination he felt the quivering flesh in the clutch

of his ravenous fingers. He felt it and gloated. But before such a desire could be consummated, there was his code of honor to be reckoned with. He had to "square" himself with the prosecuting attorney, his employer—if he could. It was true that he had brought him to such a crisis, but it was not premeditated, not willful. With parched tongue and swollen lips now he turned toward the prostrate figure of Baird.

"I'm sorry I got youse into this," he began hoarsely. "I'm sorry I lied to that whelp last night. I was boozed, an' when he begun pumpin' me, I thought I'd string him along wit' a ghost story 'bout youse knowin' I was lyin' when I took th' stand agin' this——" And here he upset a long seething caldron of selected blasphemy and East Side characterization against the "professor."

His "squaring" over and done with, Whitman prepared himself for the last throw that meant life or death; life or death for both him and Baird.

"So you worked all those hours simply to get your mouth free—free so that it could tell more of your never-ending lies. I hardly think the means were worth the end," sneered the "professor." "However, your audience will be augmented to a considerable extent very shortly. Give his satanic majesty my regards."

He turned to Baird, evidently for a farewell gibe. That love for playing with his victims cost him dear. His back had hardly turned when Whitman rose, with the stealth of the panther, to his feet.

"A long and pleasant farewell to you, Mr. Baird——" The "professor's" parting gibe trailed away, and ended in a sobbing choke. Suddenly, in a twinkling, the stool pigeon, with a snarling oath, had rushed upon him.

The "professor," taken by surprise at the wholly unexpected attack, for a moment gave ground before his burly antagonist; then, in a paroxysm of fury, he writhed and twisted, his slim body flexible as steel. He swung his arm clear, and the long knife got home, a darker red, slowly widening on the ox-blood shirt, tallying its score. With a snarl, Whitman clenched his big fist and crashed it against his adversary's jaw.

"That's right, smash him!" roared Baird furiously.

A thin streamer of blood came flecking down the "professor's" face. His eyes, starting from the pressure of his antagonist's implacable fingers, were aflame with demoniacal fury.

Again Whitman swung his big fist with all his strength. But with a sudden, frantic twist his enemy dodged the blow; then, jerking backward, managed to free his throat from the death grip. Before the stool pigeon could recover his balance, the smaller man, with a savage spring, was inside his guard, upon him. The long knife was buried twice in rapid succession, and Whitman, with a strangled sob, dropped slowly to one knee, then crashed backward to the floor.

The "professor," the incarnation of a demon, his mouth drawn taut across his white, blood-smeared face, turned to the prosecuting attorney.

"'Smash him, eh?'" he cackled. "Well, we'll see how you——"

There came a crash of glass from the rear window, and, simultaneously, a voice like a whiplash shouted:

"Hands up, 'professor,' or I'll drill you through the lungs!"

The "professor's" eyes, red with venom, darted to the police captain's cap, the extended arm, the threatening blue snout of the revolver that had suddenly appeared in the blackness of the shattered window. For a moment he stood transfixed; then, like a tiger about to be deprived of its prey, he made a lunge at the helpless figure of the prosecuting attorney.

As the knife was about to descend, there came a thin vomit of flame from the shattered window, and the "professor" went over in a tumbled heap, a bullet through him. Then the hall door came down with a crash, the window was flung up, and a flood of bluecoats swamped the room.

At Baird's half-hysterical command, bluecoats, who ordinarily would have spurned him as a thing of contempt, bent over the body of Jim Whitman and strove desperately to revive him. But their efforts were futile. The stool pigeon had staked his last throw.

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And in the back room of a dingy saloon in Five Points—a room filled with cheap cigarette smoke and unclean verbiage—another stool pigeon, ferret-eyed, brittle-nailed, was sitting at a sloppy table with a bottle of "Star" brandy. And he was gloating over the money he had made by selling a companion's life to a criminal now in the hospital awaiting transportation to Sing Sing—gloating over the money he had received for betraying that same criminal's hiding place to an ambitious police captain. It is a minor feather in his cap that his financial cupidity was the means of saving a prosecuting attorney's life, even as it had been the means of jeopardizing it.

MILITARY ETIQUETTE.

An excellent story is told of Lord Herbert Kitchener and a certain trooper who volunteered in a gilt-edged Yeomanry regiment during the South African War.

The young man, scion of a noble house, happened to be one of Lord Kitchener's orderlies on a certain day, and during a council of war he was sent for to take a message. The youthful aristocrat strolled into the apartment where Lord Kitchener and his staff were discussing the plan of campaign.

"You wanted me, Kitchener?" he inquired languidly.

The staff, hard-beaten soldiers all of them, almost fainted. Signs of displeasure appeared on Lord Kitchener's face. Suddenly they were replaced by a pleasant smile.

"Oh, don't say 'Kitchener,'" he demurred, in dulcet tones, "it sounds so formal. Call me Herbert!"

WONDERFUL HENS.

An American gentleman, spending his holidays in County Roscommon, Ireland, fell into conversation with Pat, who was feeding his hens.

"I guess, Pat, you haven't as good hens here as we have in the States."

"Perhaps not," said Pat.

"I'll tell you," said the Yankee, "about a hen my mother had. She went out one day and ate a feed of corn, and returned and laid twelve eggs. She went out the next day and ate a feed of corn, and laid twelve more eggs. She went out on the third day, and returned and laid twelve more eggs. She went out on the fourth day, and hatched seventy-two chicks out of thirty-six eggs. Now that is the kind of hen we have in the States."

"Well," said Pat, "I'll tell you about a half-blind hen my mother had. She ate a feed of sawdust thinking it was oatmeal. She went to her nest and laid a plank twelve

feet long. She ate more sawdust the next day, and again laid a plank twelve feet long. Again on the third day she ate more sawdust, and laid another twelve-foot plank. She sat on the three planks, and hatched three kitchen chairs, a sofa, one table, and a mahogany chest of drawers. Now," said Pat, with a twinkle in his eye, "that is the kind of hen we have in Roscommon."

The Man With the Thumb.

By GEORGE PARSONS BRADFORD.

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Dick Tarrion, a young man out of employment, while looking over the want columns of a newspaper, is accosted by a man whom he knows only as a frequenter of the cheap restaurant where Dick has been in the habit of taking his breakfasts, and whom Dick has named "Gray Eyes." The man calls Dick's attention to an advertisement for a close-mouthed gentleman, willing to travel, cool, and having had no experience in the insurance business. Dick applies for the position by letter, and is directed to call up "Twenty-o-ten, Chelsea" on the telephone. As he does so he overhears a conversation on the wire. One speaker says that he will make Richard Tarrion wish he had never been born. Dick is engaged over the telephone, in a mysterious manner, and is directed to report to Mr. Horton, president of the Mortimer Trust Company, who tells him that at the expiration of five weeks he will receive a check for one thousand dollars for his services. He is supplied with a railway ticket to Cincinnati and two hundred dollars in currency, but the nature of the work he is to perform remains a mystery. He is told, however, that when his train reaches Altoona, at night, further instructions will be given in a letter which will be placed in his sleeping berth by a man named Michaels. He is also requested to change his name from Tarrion to Trent. When the train reaches Altoona, he sees that Michaels is none other than "Gray Eyes." The letter given to him reveals the fact that Michaels was a collegemate of Dick's. It also directs Dick to go to a little village named Roan's, at the foot of Roan Mountain, in Kentucky, and there get the thumbprint of a man whose photograph is inclosed in the letter. Dick discovers on the train a man who was shadowing him before he left New York, but he soon disappears. Later, on another train, Dick hurls from the train and over a bridge a pretended commercial traveler who tries to get from him the letter he received from Michaels. Riding on horseback to Roan's, Dick passes a powerfully built young man who is talking with a pretty girl. Later he finds this man being shot at by three mountaineers. Dick opens fire on the three, who make off. The young fellow explains he is Lang McComb, and that his assailants are Wades, with whom the McCombs have long been engaged in a feud. Dick, arriving at Roan's, becomes friendly with a storekeeper named Quake. Quake warns him that the Wades will attack him. He learns that Ed Wade is engaged to Bess Roan, the beautiful girl to whom he saw Lang McComb talking at the roadside, and that Bess really is in love with Lang. She is the daughter of Major Roan, who is supposed to be descended from a powerful European family. Bess comes to Quake's to warn Dick that Ed Wade is on his way to kill him. Lang appears and, with Quake and Dick, opens fire on the Wades. Lang and Dick get to their horses and make off. Lang's horse breaks a leg, and Dick insists that Lang ride behind him. A rifle cracks behind them and the horse plunges madly.

CHAPTER XI.

BACK TO BACK.

Lang gritted his teeth as he hopped along on one leg, trying to get a purchase by which to swing himself up.

"Drat the beast!" he cried; adding: "That was a shore close shave, stranger. I felt the wind o' hit 'tween me and the hawss."

"I——"

What it was I began to say I don't know. Something gave me pause and made me gasp suddenly—something that seemed to enter beneath my right shoulder blade and dart with lightninglike swiftness up toward my collar bone—something that was like the blade of a white-hot knife, slipped smoothly into my flesh, burning—an agonizing pain.

I sighed—I remembered hearing the sound distinctly, as of some one at a distance—and seemed to fall forward for a long time, ever down, down, down into a black void that presently was no longer black, but filled with writhing, seething flame that lapped and coiled at my slow-descending form.

And eventually I found that I was holding myself in the saddle by a hand that gripped the pommel until it hurt, while the other hand, still holding the reins, was clutching at my throat.

We were moving. I comprehended in some way that Lang had succeeded at last in climbing up behind me, and now, by some marvel of horsemanship, was seated with his back to me, his face to the horse's tail. My feet, I found, were beating madly on the beast's ribs, which distracted him and made him move forward at a halting gallop—the best pace he could muster under the double load.

The sweet, fragrant coolness of the night air was like a soft caress upon my brow; and this, I conceive, was what had brought me out of my pain-racked stupor.

I could not move without agony. My position, as I found it, I managed to hold with some difficulty.

There was sound behind us—sounds of men shouting, and flying reports of rifles; and now and again Lang would clutch at my side for support, raise his arm, and his revolver would speak.

After some time I made out that he was calling to me—had been for goodness knows how long.

"Trent—— Trent—— Revolver—— Trent——"

I subdued my selfish pain with an effort, and tried to understand what he was saying; while the motion of the horse shook and thrilled that bullet wound and made everything seem unreal, illusive, and incoherent.

Yet I had sense enough to know that it was real—terribly and most dangerously real.

"What?" I gasped.

"What's the matter with ye?" he demanded sharply, and bang! went that pistol in response to a shot.

"They've shot me," I said, as loudly as I might, "in the chest."

He groaned.

"Hand me yo' gun," he said, "if ye can. By God! Ed Wade'll sweat blood for this night's work, or my name's not Lang McComb!"

The night was again swaying and leaping about me madly, the road—a white glow under the starlight—rising up to and falling away from me with sickening irregularity; and I heard my own groans from a long ways off.

But I finally was able to pass him the gun. He gripped it, and pressed my hand at the same time.

"Hold out as long's ye kin," he said. "Don't be afeerd—I'll pull ye through. And when I yell pull this hyeh beast in if ye kin."

For reply he got a grunt which seemed to answer all purposes. I chewed at my lips, in an effort to retain consciousness, till they bled. He was now reloading his own revolver.

"Don't see why I can't hit neither o' them," he muttered to himself; and then:

"There's that sycamore at last!"

I wondered if my ears were failing me; there was a certain roaring in them through which outside sounds penetrated fairly distinctly, as the thin treble of a child will rise clear above the incessant clamor of heavy seas upon a sandy shore.

I could no longer make out the hoofbeats of our pursuers. I hoped they might have given up the chase; we seemed to have come a long way, and should be near the McComb place now if ever.

But no! Again I heard the rattle of those confounded Winchesters and the shrilling of the leaden pellets around our ears. I shivered, and then, all at once, Lang burst out into the most horrible series of screeches I have ever been unfortunate enough to have to listen to.

It startled my senses out of a sort of dreamy lethargy they were slipping into—a sensation of helplessness like that we feel under the influence of a nightmare; and I remembered that I was to stop the horse.

Pulling in on the reins, I brought him to a willing halt, and felt the absence of Lang's bulk from his haunches. I was fully conscious now—in pain, but clear of eye and brain—and I wanted to see.

My mount helped me in this desire. I fancy he had enjoyed the flight and fight as well as had the pursuers. Anyhow, he veered around now until his head was again toward Roan's, and stood gazing down the road with an expression of great intelligence and interest on his pricked-forward ears.

Lang I saw dismounted—of course—and running back, a spitting revolver in either hand. He was still giving vent to his ear-splitting war whoops between shots, and appeared to be having a bully good time.

A little distance from him I saw two horses at a halt and half turned, so that they presented a broadside, so to speak, to us.

One I thought riderless, but afterward made out a man clinging helplessly about his neck. The second animal bore a rider, erect, who was just at that moment aiming at Lang with his rifle.

His peril seemed so great, his daring of death so maniacal, that I rose, wounded though I was, in my stirrups, and sent a thin, feeble cry down the road after Lang's retreating figure.

It was an effort wasted. Lang knew what he was about, even if I could not see the method in his madness.

For hardly had my cry spent its slim strength against the hills when it was taken up and echoed and reechoed from half a dozen throats, and, with a scurry of hoofs and a rattle of pistols, men bore down upon me, and, dividing, swept past to the rescue.

They were the McCombs in force, roused from their beds by Lang's hideous screeching. They were half dressed and wholly mad, riding bareback and ludicrous to the eye—but welcome.

The man with the Winchester paused in surprise. I fancy he had not thought he had ventured so near the McComb home, with his companion. He looked up from his sighting along the barrel, and—I could not see his face, but imagined the chagrined expression—pulled the trigger aimlessly. The shot spent itself in all outdoors.

Nor did he pause to observe its effect. Wheeling both horses, he let out a frightened yell, and lashed them into a dead run on the back route. A few of the McComb contingent pursued, and, like him, vanished promptly into the dark shadows of the wooded road.

The rest gathered about Lang. I heard him talking loudly, pointing, gesticulating in my direction; a breeze sprang up, and carried to my ears angry murmurs from the group.

One man's voice rose clear and threatening:

"Kill every whelp in the litter——"

And then they turned and came toward me. I saw them, sitting tight and gripping the pommel to retain my consciousness.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HAND UPON MY SHOULDER.

For many, many days I seemed to have been blundering hither and thither, weary and aching, in a dense fog. It was everywhere, on all sides of me, enveloping my world in a shroud of blindness, thick, deep, mysterious, impervious to sight, but not to sound.

Through this, I knew not why, I was doomed to wander for always, in some strange, anguished search for I knew not what. I was only sentient to this: that I must go on, on, ever on.

But, gradually, the fog began to lift, and ere long I could see somewhat; and the world stopped its reeling and stood still, with me in the center of it, lying on my back on a rude, clean couch in a small, close, sweet-scented room.

People went in and out, speaking in low tones; one stopped to gaze at me, or to smooth my pillow, and another brought me food in a bowl—some thin gruel, which I lapped at greedily.

And presently I understood.

I was in a room in the McComb homestead, in the mountains. I knew this, hearing Lang calling cheerily to his dogs outside, beyond the little open window at the foot of my bed. And a woman came and looked in at me—a woman with kind eyes singularly like Lang's in expression, and with a ripe, round, pink-cheeked face, homely and honest.

She smiled and went away. I closed my eyes and waited. I was weak and light-headed—felt a good deal as if I did not weigh more than about a pound or a pound and a half, or say two pounds for a limit.

I heard Lang's voice again, and the scrambling of hoofs. He was saying good-by to some one, and explaining that he would be back soon. I felt suddenly ill-used, as if he were deserting me.

But I lay on. At intervals horses passed the house, thumping slowly along the mountain road. One stopped and entered. I hoped it was Lang returning.

It was not—it was better; it was Beth, calling to ask after me.

She came upstairs, after a while, and entered my room, and sat down on a clumsy, old-fashioned chair by the head of my bed.

I thought I had never seen anything so heavenly as her face, so I smiled at her, and was rewarded with a smile that made the blood pulse in my temples.

Yet, always, I knew that it was but a friendly feeling, no more, that brought her to my side.

She sat there, talking in a low, calm tone, telling me the news of the days past. It seemed that I had been unconscious for a matter of over half a week, but that I would be all right with a day or so more of rest.

"Logan?" I asked, thinking of the man who had led me down at the ford.

He would live, she said; his wound had been more serious than mine, but he was slowly recovering.

She had pulled Quake back into the house, when she found that we had made good our effort at escape, and the attacking party had all streamed out in pursuit of us, leaving them in safety for a brief time, which they had improved at once.

Quake had saddled his horse and ridden up into the mountains, to wait until things would be quieted down somewhat, and it would be safe for him to return.

She—Beth—had ridden back to—she hesitated here, and at length brought out the word with an effort—to her home.

Meanwhile, the Wade gang, pursuing us, had divided into two parties, as I knew. The ruck had kept doggedly on, in hope of being in at our death; but when the McComb party sallied out, and drove back the two foremost men, they had also gone farther and had chased the remainder of the gang halfway back to Badalia.

Quake's store was therefore saved from burning.

Singularly enough—but justly, I thought—all the casualties, except my own wound, had been on the Wade side of the argument.

Ed Wade himself was nursing a broken head; his horse had been shot, he said, and in falling had thrown him so that his forehead came in contact with a rock.

I thought that I could have given a better and more picturesque and true account of this accident than Ed Wade had seen fit to; but said nothing.

Two others had been wounded among Wade's retainers. So it appeared that we three—Lang, old Quake, and I—had repaid amply Ed Wade for the loss of two horses and my bullet wound.

This knowledge made me feel rather happy and contented; the strange combination of adventures I had blundered into since my arrival in the Sinful Creek community had aroused in me a feeling of intense animosity to the Wade outfit—not unnaturally, perhaps—and quite as distinct a sense of loyalty to the McCombs.

I felt that, having been of service in saving Lang McComb from assassination, I had conferred a signal benefit upon the whole valley; he was the sort of man that humanity there could not afford to do without.

Beth left me after a while, and I turned over, contentedly, to sleep, when I overheard—I could not help it—Lang's mother waylay her in the hall.

"Beth," she said affectionately, as if she knew well and loved the girl, "aire ye comin' back hyeh to-morrow?"

There was a pause before I heard the girl's reply.

"I don't think so. No," she added, with sudden decision. "I mustn't—I dassent. Ed would—if he knew——"

Her voice broke here, and she did not finish.

I fancied she was running away, but the old woman detained her; for when they spoke again their voices were more distant.

"Beth, Beth!" said Mrs. McComb, in a tone of gentle reproach. "What for aire ye treatin' Lang so? Ain't he good 'nuff for ye, gal? D'ye think that vagabone Ed Wade's as good's my boy?"

"No," responded the girl brokenly. "You know I don't—he isn't——"

"Then why'n goodness' name don't ye marry Lang, 'stid o'——"

"I can't—I can't! Oh, mother, don't ask me."

"But I will ax ye. I want to know."

"I can't tell you. I've promised, and—oh, I don't love Ed, but I must, I must!"

With this she must have broken suddenly away; for a moment or two afterward I heard her mount and go kiting down the road. From the pace she lashed her horse into, she must have thought herself in a hurry—or have been wanting to leave behind her disturbing thoughts.

During the following afternoon I was permitted to get up, dress, and take the mountain air from the veranda in front of the house. I found Lang McComb there with a rifle across his knees; he was tilted back in his chair, serenely gazing at the misty purple sky line of the distant Cumberlands.

A second rifle, a repeating Winchester, was leaning against the wall by the chair. Lang explained this armed peace characteristically.

"I hev sent word to Ed Wade," he said, smiling, "that, if he hankers after shootin' me up any mo', he kin find me hyeh. I ain't gwine to cross the valley on pu'pose to git shot."

We talked for a few moments. One subject was uppermost in my mind, and presently I found a chance to turn the conversation in that direction. I felt my way delicately, but finally managed to give him the substance of what I had heard pass between his mother and the girl. Why would she not marry him?

"Look hyeh, Mr. Trent," said Lang suddenly—hitherto he had been calling me "Trent"—"don't ye worry 'bout Beth marryin' Ed Wade. She only thinks she will. She ain't goin' to, honest? Say, d'ye reckon I'd let her? That hound-pup, Ed Wade! I allow not."

I felt uneasily that I had been rebuked for interfering. I squirmed in my chair for a while, and then, finding that I was considered perfectly cured, now that I was at last up and about, announced my intention of riding down to Quake's, to get my camera and satchel.

Lang gravely permitted me leave of absence, and caught and saddled my horse himself. He advised, however, that I ride in the shade as much as possible; the sun, striking my still convalescent wounds in shoulder and throat, would do them no good.

This was good counsel, I felt; and I improved upon it by riding slowly. The day was exceptionally fine, the air delicious to my city-bred lungs. I loitered along, drinking it in great chestfuls.

Again I found myself on an erratic, irresponsible road—a continuation, in fact, of the one I had traveled on from Milan to Roan's.

I was content to take the rest of the afternoon—though that was not much—for my ride; but after a while my journey began to seem quite long. I had had no notion that Lang and I had covered so much ground in our break for life that night.

In time, I became weary, and, coming to a cool, inviting glade in the woods by the roadside, I alighted, tethered my horse, and sat down at some distance from the highway, with a clump of laurels at my back.

Lighting my pipe, I prepared to puzzle out something that was troubling me more than a little—how I was to find my man—"the man with the thumb"—without wandering too far from safety at McComb's, without falling into the hands of the Wades. And it seemed as if, by the totally unforseen manner in which I had involved myself in the feud, was faced by a task extremely difficult of accomplishment.

Yet I felt undismayed. Really, I was enjoying myself, and felt that I should win out somehow or other; for Lang had assured me that I was entirely safe if I confined myself to the Roan side of the valley and did not stray over to Badalia. And I had a habit, those days, of believing in myself, in my eventful success.

The afternoon dragged on drowsily, the sun slanting slowly toward the west. Myself, I drowsed, nodding over my problem—thinking for the most part, it may be, of Beth Roan and the beauty of her as I had seen it.

Somehow it seemed queer to me that when I had met the girl but twice, I should find the charm of her appealing so strongly to my imagination. I had but to close my eyes, I found, to see her sweet face hovering before me. So I kept my eyes closed, for the most part.

And yet I was to open them suddenly with a cry, to sit bolt upright, gasping with astonishment. For, in some strange reversion of thought, while my mind was centered upon Beth Roan, it had suddenly struck off at the most direct of tangents, and—side by side with the girl's, I saw in my fancy the features of a man.

Now the resemblance between them both was too marked to be passed over. It was striking, as I thought—a natal likeness. And the man was one whom I had never seen. He was none other than he whose photograph had been handed me by Gray Eyes, on the train—so long ago; he whose face I was to carry in my memory, he of whose thumb I was to get an impression.

It was clear to me, abruptly, that I must find Beth Roan. If there were a feeling of pity in her heart for me, I thought, if she held me in any gratitude for saving the life of the man she loved—Lang McComb—then I would be safe in taking her into my confidence, in asking her aid. Surely she would not refuse me.

Having some vague thought of going directly to Badalia to find the girl—for she said she would not return to McComb's—I was about to rise; had even swung myself up on my knee, when a hand glided out of the bushes behind me and settled firmly upon my shoulder with a grip whose might I was unable to deny, in my enfeebled state.

And, too, without delay, a second large, horny palm closed over my mouth. I was dragged, struggling and terrified, into the cool shadows and seclusion of the forest behind me.

CHAPTER XIII.

I TAKE BIG CHANCES.

"Don't ye whimper, suh! Don't ye do it! Ef ye do, I'll—well——"

A pistol's butt hung in the air above me threateningly, at which I gazed with an apprehension strangely tempered by the tone of the speaker. It was not unkindly; there was nothing of malice in the tones—rather a humorous appreciation of my fright.

Moreover, the hand which had so lovingly attached itself to my coat collar, and that which had closed so firmly upon my opening lips—opening to let out a screech for help—had not been ungentle. They had had a duty to perform, and that they had done with thoroughness, but with consideration, also.

For my part, I was too weak to make any resistance worth mentioning. I wriggled feebly, it's true, and tried to call out—but to no purpose. I found I was neatly trapped, so lay submissive, but waiting for the chance to draw my revolver. I was convinced that I would stand no show for my life in Ed Wade's power—— And it's more fun to die fighting than any other way I can imagine. But not yet had it come to that extremity.

"That's hettah, suh," said the voice. "Jes' rest yo'self, an' don't fret. Ed Wade ain't got ye yit. Don't ye remimber me, suh?"

Remember him? I could almost have kissed him, so relieved was I to find that it was Quake.

Still, a glance at his face was enough to assure me that the time was not one for frivolity. He was livid under the action of some strong emotion, and his hands, the moment he released me, began their fitful vibration of nervousness. His eyes wore a worried, anxious gleam which told me that no good boded for him—or possibly, for his friends, the McCombs.

"What's the matter?" I asked at once, unconsciously whispering hoarsely, as one who fears a listener.

"S-sh!" he told me, lifting a warning hand, and cocking his ear to the breeze. Evidently he heard nothing, for presently he seemed less agitated.

"Be ye fr'm Lang's?" he demanded promptly, disregarding my query.

"Yes——"

"Is thet yo' hawss out thar?"

"Yes, but——"

"Then fo' Gawd's sake, suh," he interrupted appealingly, "mount and hump yo'self fo' safety. Get back to Lang ez quick ez ye kin, an' tell——"

He paused, again listening.

"Why?" I whispered. "What's the trouble?"

"Trebble enough, suh. Wade's gang be on the wahpath. Mos' likely they-alls comin' this hyehaways now—— S-sh——"

He rose suddenly and slipped through the bushes. I stood up, watching him approach my horse, pat the beast soothingly, grip her nostrils to prevent a neigh, and finally, with infinite stealthy precautions, untether and lead her back into the brush.

He passed me, leading the animal, with a cautioning gesture for silence, and retied her in a spot screened from the roadway. Then he stood at gaze, like a statue, holding the horse's nostrils and watching the road.

Following his example, I saw, after some dragging moments, two men, unknown to me and of rough aspect, ride slowly past us, talking together in low tones. Both carried heavy Winchesters across their saddle bows, and both were keenly scrutinizing each inch of the woodland.

Fortunately they missed us and rode on. Quake waited a length of time that seemed exaggerated to me before he ventured to release the horse's head, and make an explanation.

"Some o' Wade's outfit, suh," he said briefly. "They-all lit down on me this arternoon. I heerd 'em comin' and scooted. I'm gwine to warn Lang."

"What does it mean?" I demanded.

"Beth Roan tole me, jist afore they come to my stoah, suh. Hit 'pears like Ed Wade went over yon, into Breathitt County, las' week, an' to-day, jist at noon, suh, he comes gallivantin' back with twenty rapscallions fr'm Breathitt. He 'lows ez he's gwine wipe ary sign o' McComb out'r Sinful Crick Valley, suh. They-alls gwine burn Lang out t'-night."

I stood motionless, staring at him, horrified, hardly able to believe my ears. In a moment he went on, smiling slightly:

"Thet is, ef no one don't go an' tell Lang they-alls

comin'. I'm gwine to, suh, and Wade's gang'll find a mighty hot welcome at Roan's, suh—ef I know anything about Lang. Ye better leave yo' hawss hyeh, suh, an' come with me to Lang's. What?"

A sudden light had burst upon me; a scheme to outwit Ed Wade.

With "Wade's gang" out for the night, bent on battle, murder, and sudden death for all McCombs and all that family's adherents, Badalia, naturally, would be deserted save for the women and children.

Beth Roan, too, would be there—perhaps unwillingly. I knew enough to guess that Ed Wade had some unusually strong hold upon the girl to compel her to his will as he had; and the matter of the resemblance which had just struck me so forcibly completed a chain of reasoning.

"Look here," I said, "is there any one in the valley that looks like Miss Roan, Mr. Quake?"

"No, suh." He shook his head, staring at me as if he thought I had suddenly taken leave of my senses. "Leastways, thar ain't been no one sinst her father died—ol' Major Roan."

"But," I persisted, "is he dead?"

Again he gave me the answer that I had received from him the night of my entry into the valley: "Some say as he is, suh; I dunno."

"You're not sure?"

He hesitated. "I've heerd some say as his ha'nt hed been seen, suh——"

I proceeded to mystify him still more.

"Who'll be at Badalia to-night?"

"No one, 'cept'n th' women and chillern an' dawgs, suh."

"And Beth Roan?"

"Yes, suh—she tole me she hed to go back, suh. I dunno why."

Rapidly I outlined to him my suspicions, trusting him perhaps recklessly because I knew that he adored the young girl and opposed her marriage with Wade. And the verdict, when I had detailed my scheme, was an enthusiastic old man frantically wringing me by the hand.

"Go on, suh!" he cried. "Go on an' win, Gawd bless ye, suh!"

"There's no danger," I said, more to reassure myself than to him; "even if I'm seen before I find Miss Roan, no one in Badalia knows me. True, I've encountered the Wades twice, but both times it was too dark for them to see me. Personally, I'll be safe enough. And if I win——"

"Ye'll win, suh. Ye sholy will. An' after this hyeh hez blowed over, ye kin allus call on ol' man Quake. He's with ye, suh. Yo's sholy a man!"

With great caution he got me across the highway without being discovered by any of Wade's lurking men. Then, finally, he brought me to a narrow footpath.

"Take ye to Badalia, straight," he explained. "Hit ain't been used fo' years, suh; but thet thar path leads from Roan's to Badalia. An', fo' safety's sake, I wouldn't staht until dusk."

Then he left me to go on to warn Lang. I waited, impatiently, until nightfall, hearing no sounds but the forest's, seeing nothing save the woodland scenes; no human beings came to observe me. And, at nightfall, I started for the lion's mouth.

I found it a difficult passage that I had to make through the bottom lands of Sinful Creek Valley. In my enfeebled condition, fearful of straining myself, and thereby reopening my wounds, so proceeding cautiously with frequent rests, it was eleven, or after, before I stood in the dusty road which formed the Main Street of Badalia—and its only one.

Along it houses straggled, dark, quiet, deserted, mysterious, and unreal in the moon's illusive rays. There were no sounds, the silence seemed ominous. In a few scattered windows only, shone dull yellow glows, to signify that the inmates—the womenfolk who had been left behind—were awake and watchful.

Keeping in the shadow as much as possible, I cautiously made my way along the roadside, wondering what house I would better enter first, to further my ends. Completely ignorant of the place as I was, I had no notion, now that I was on the scene, as to what my best move should be.

And suddenly it came to me, as I paused almost bewildered, that I was doing a very foolish and futile thing, to no good end.

And even at that same instant my straining ears caught, from across the valley, faint and indistinct, the sharp crack of a rifle. The dogs of Badalia heard it, and at once gave raucous tongue, frenzied.

Frightened, fearing that I would be discovered, I took to my heels, and ran—ran as if every dog in Badalia were snapping at my calves. Perhaps I need not have been so timorous—but I took no chances. Happily, none of Badalia's human inhabitants noticed me; presently I seemed to leave the village behind, and was about to stop and return, more stealthily than before, if that were possible, when I saw, through the trees ahead, the moonlight shining on the corner of a white house.

A painted house—of all things in this blowsy neighborhood! I reconnoitered quietly, and came to the conclusion that this must be Beth's home.

It was a place more pretentious than anything I had dreamed of finding; three stories in height, a veranda and side porches, glazed windows, the semblance of a neglected lawn in front, and a really and truly stand-up board fence with a gate at the edge of the road!

It seemed, as far as I could determine by close observation, to be deserted. It would be dangerous to enter—but that was what I had come to brave. Finally I decided to risk it, and, with my heart in my mouth, came boldly up the road, opened the gate, and walked to the veranda—to halt terrified when a sluggish, lackluster voice rose from its shadows:

"Howdy, stranger? What kin I do for ye?"

I looked intently into the darkness; and the speaker suddenly drawing upon a cigar and causing the ash to fall, I made out the glowing butt of it with a dim mass behind which might or might not be a man.

"I'm looking——" I began slowly, trying to think up a good lie, and then telling it: "I'm looking for Mr. Wade—Mr. Ed Wade. Does he live here?"

A huge figure erected itself from an armchair. It seemed dimly familiar in some way. Also the voice smote my tympanums reminiscently.

"I reckon he does," said the man. "Come in. What do ye want of me?"

I was completely astonished, for the moment speechless.

"Go on," he cried, with gathering impatience. "Tell me yo' business. I'm Ed Wade."

TO BE CONTINUED.

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